

Housekeeping Mage from Another World

Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home!

BY You FUGURUMA

ILLUST. NAMA



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Part 1: A Housekeeping Mage's Daily Life

Chapter 0: Four Years Earlier

"It's so late."

As she walked toward home at a pace so quick it was nearly a trot, Shiori checked the time on her smartphone. The screen cast a faint illumination over the dim street with its few streetlights. The time indicated by the digital numbers showed it was late enough that, in just a few more minutes, the date would change over.

She hadn't had dinner yet, but making something would be too much work. There was a convenience store up ahead—she'd buy something there.

Closing her phone cover with a snap, she tucked it away in her work bag.

And then...

All of a sudden, her vision distorted. A sensation similar to vertigo made Shiori stop in her tracks and shut her eyes tightly. She didn't think she pushed herself too hard that often, but ever since she'd left her mid-twenties behind, she found it harder and harder to recover from exhaustion. For a while, she endured the dizziness, but when it felt like even the ground beneath her feet began to reel, she let out a small groan.

The ground twisted and flexed, causing her to sway violently. In the next moment, she felt as if she were floating, like the street had disappeared from under her.

"Oh..."

The instant she realized she was going to fall, a crushing torrent of immense energy crashed down on her—and her consciousness was swallowed by darkness.

Chapter 1: The Woman Who Became a Housekeeping Mage

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In the northwestern part of the continent of Alphandis lies the capital of the Torisval region of the Storydia Kingdom, Tris. Not far from the town's market district stands a building with plastered walls. Alec stopped and looked up at a sign that hung from those walls as it swayed in the wind. Lively chatter and noise could be heard coming from the building that had once been a shuttered inn and now, having been remodeled, was the Tris branch of the Adventurers' Guild. It had been a little less than four years since he'd left, but the lively energy overflowing from the place was painfully nostalgic.

Kreee. As he pushed open the amber-colored wooden door, which had been worn glossy with age, its hinges let out a creak. Inside, the clamor paused for just a moment, and he was pierced with assessing gazes. There were familiar faces he hadn't seen in a while, and the number of faces he didn't recognize had increased. Most everyone quickly lost interest and returned to their conversations, but those who knew him tossed friendly salutations his way. He returned the greetings with one hand as he headed toward the counter.

A red-haired man had set up camp at the center of the counter, and was flipping through a ledger. He stopped what he was doing and looked up at Alec.

"Hey. It's been a while."

The man extended a rough and bony hand toward him. Alec grasped it firmly and returned the smile.

"So, the great S-rank adventurer has finally become a guild master, huh?" said Alec. "Should I be offering my congratulations?"

"The previous master said he was retiring," the man replied. "Thankfully, they let me fill the empty seat. I was just thinking I wanted to settle down a bit, so it

was perfect. But, man, this last job of yours was a long one, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, you could say that. I ended up shackled to a taskmaster of a client for a really long time."

"Did you just get back?"

"No, I came back about a month ago. Spent some time resting my bones at my parents' place."

"I see." The red-haired man—Zack—smiled knowingly. "In that case, since I'm sure you must have energy to spare, can I ask you to take on a job for me? The difficulty level is A, but I'm having problems pulling together members for a party."

Alec paused a moment. "So, there's a taskmaster here too..." He looked over the request ticket Zack handed him and frowned. "Manticore suppression deep in the Fibria wildwood. I can see why you can't get a party together. Not only is the difficulty level high, this is going to be a pain to do."

Given the location, just getting there and back again would take ten days. After factoring in having to confront magical beasts along the way, the party that took this on probably wouldn't return for about two weeks. And it would be hard for anyone to call that thickly wooded forest comfortable, with its heavy, damp air. For half a month you'd have to get by on tough, salty field rations and "beds" so uncomfortable that it would be impossible to get a good night's sleep. While expenses were covered in addition to the generous reward, considering the term of the contract, the difficulty level, and the fact that you'd have roughly two weeks of awful camping, the job could in no way be considered a profitable one.

"This request has been sitting around for two months now," said Zack. "The Tourism Association keeps pestering me about it. I do have a few people who said they'd take it on for me, but we're short on vanguards. I was starting to think that, worst case, I'd go. But if a magic swordsman who's basically S-rank took it on, that'd make up for any other minor deficiencies, right?"

Alec hesitated. "Heading straight back out into sleeping outdoors isn't really..."

While Alec might have had a month to recuperate, he'd only just gotten back from a long-term job. Frankly, all he'd wanted to do today was show he was back and grab a low-level request to warm up. He sighed, not bothering to hide the gloom in his expression.

Zack gave him a smile pregnant with hidden meaning, as if to say he'd had an excellent idea. "Listen, if you do this for me, I'll throw in my secret weapon. And in celebration of your return, I'll pick up the hiring fee."

"Some solo-type adventurer of yours, is it?" asked Alec. "You're being generous and I don't understand why. Is he strong?"

"Nah. Strictly a support-type mage. Not suited for battle at all, but she'll definitely prove helpful."

"Is that so? Well, this mage must be either incredibly skilled or very lucky." Feeling a little like he was getting snared in a dubious get-rich-quick scheme, Alec turned a doubting gaze on Zack, who confidently told him that he'd understand if he took this mage along.

"She's the reason the Tris branch's success and completion rates on high-level quests has blown past those of the other branches," said Zack. "Just take her with you. You won't regret it."

Considering that Zack was going to the trouble of paying out of his own pocket, he must have really wanted this long-neglected request cleared up.

After another moment's hesitation, Alec gave up and nodded. "All right, I'll take it on. Set me up to meet the other members."

Zack's red hair swayed as he laughed with satisfaction.

The next day, the members of the suppression party gathered together. One was an old friend of Alec's—a dual sword wielder, who had started as an adventurer around the same time as him. There was also an archer, a man whom Alec knew by face and name but not much more, and a woman who was a physicker—someone who could use healing techniques. While all of them were B-rank or higher, the members skewed toward being rear guards. It all made sense now. Certainly, a group like this would be less than reliable as a

manticore suppression team.

And then there was the mage in question. The woman, who had brought along an unusual slime as her familiar, had skin of a cream complexion that was rarely seen in the northwestern regions of the continent, and lustrous raven hair. Her eyes were so dark they were nearly black, and her features were even and flat. Perhaps she was from the east. Her face wasn't beautiful in a way that stood out, but she was a woman whose gentle, reserved smile made quite an impression. And she had a small, dainty frame that could easily have been mistaken for that of a young girl. Given the glow to her skin and the shape of her face, Alec decided that she must have been around twenty years old. When he asked, he was surprised to learn that her age wasn't so far removed from his own thirty-four years. She was from a people whose childlike facial features and small builds lent them a youthful appearance.

But her appearance wasn't what was at issue. What they needed here were skills. And this woman, a B-rank adventurer, called herself a "housekeeping mage," a title that Alec didn't think he'd heard before. She said that she would take on cooking and all other routine duties while they were on their venture. Apparently, the others knew of her through rumors, and word that she'd be joining their party had put a sparkle in their eyes. Clemens, the dual sword wielder that Alec had teamed up with many times before, declared that he would personally vouch for her abilities.

In that case, she'd just have to show them what she could do.

With the introductions and preparations completed, the group dispersed. They had decided to begin their journey early the next morning.

"This... This is much too comfortable." The murmur that slipped from Alec's mouth was nearly a moan. Beside him, the archer, Linus, nodded emphatically in agreement.

To tell the truth, those same words had made it all the way up into Alec's throat on the very first night of their expedition, but the idea of handing out praise so quickly and easily irked him, so he'd swallowed them before they'd reached his mouth. Now, three days into their travels, though, he couldn't deny

it any longer.

All of the work that the woman called Shiori did was so magnificent that with one night's rest, all of the fatigue of the previous day disappeared. No matter how unpleasant the journey had been, as long as you made it to the end of the day, you were guaranteed a hot meal, a bath, and a bed. The party's morale was soaring, and they had plenty of energy and spirit.

The deep woods where the manticore made its lair should have taken at least five days' travel to reach, but on the third they found they were already very close to their destination. If they continued in the way they had been going, they would arrive in the deep woods just before noon the next day.

A housekeeping mage...

With so little magical power, she was useless as a combat mage—that is, a mage specializing in offensive skills. To make up for that, however, she used magic to take on all of the chores, like cooking and cleaning, single-handedly. That, apparently, was where she'd gotten the name for her unique profession.

When people are completely exhausted from traveling and fighting, the honest truth is that they'd really rather have nothing to do with cooking, or anything of the sort. There were plenty of adventurers who made do with meals of dried meat, hardtack, and other preserved foods. The way she took on all of those kinds of tasks made you grateful for her presence. To have Shiori with you was to have access to a shocking level of pleasurable rest and relief.

On the very day they set out, the first surprise Alec encountered while camping was the provision of a bath.

"The bath is ready," said Shiori. "Please, take your time and enjoy it while I prepare dinner."

"A bath?!" Alec was completely flabbergasted. He'd never even imagined being offered such a thing while camping. He'd thought she was busy doing something while they were setting up the campsite, but he certainly couldn't have predicted this.

"If you have any laundry, please set it out here," Shiori added. "I'll have it washed and dried by morning."

Before he had the chance to voice his doubts about such a thing being possible in a place with no watering hole, Alec was dragged into the tent that sheltered the bathing area by Clemens, who seemed to be familiar with the whole setup. Never mind the fact that the women on the venture had insisted that the men go first, and the fact that the men had gratefully accepted...it was a bath. A real bath. Alec's expectations had been low—a tub or basin for washing in, at most—but instead, it was a rather impressive bathhouse. Steam rose from the water-filled hollow that had been dug out of the ground in the middle of the tent. Nearby, small washbasins and towels as well as soap had been laid out, clearly for their use.

While Alec and Linus stood there dumbstruck, Clemens had already gotten in the bath. Eventually, Alec took off his equipment, stripped off his clothes, and stood at the edge of the water. He could sense the remnants of magic in the firmly packed, cylindrical depression in the ground, and in the pleasantly hot water that filled it.

“Magic, huh?” Alec asked.

“Impressive, isn't it?” Clemens said this as proudly as if he'd done it himself. “Apparently, she uses earth magic to shape the ground, water magic to fill it up, and fire magic to bring it to the right temperature.”

Alec was silent for a moment. “It does seem that she doesn't have much magical power, but her precision is of the same caliber as a high-level mage. This is magnificent work.”

Her lack of magical power meant that the bath was a little small, but if those waiting used the time to cleanse themselves and everyone went in by turns, then it was more than large enough for three grown men to use. Alec stepped into the water—slowly, to get used to the temperature. Little by little he lowered his whole body in, and a long, deep sigh escaped him. The warmth of the water eased the stiffness in his muscles, and it felt like all his weariness was fading away.

“This is paradise,” said Linus, shutting his eyes in ecstasy. He seemed to be in a blissful daze.

After enjoying the water for a while, Alec grabbed the soap and washed the

dirt from his body. He'd assumed that he would be sleeping covered in dust and sweat, so being clean and changing into fresh clothes was thoroughly satisfying.

"Huh?"

Even as a delicious aroma wafted through the area, making his mouth water, Alec realized something that made him tilt his head in puzzlement. The air in the depths of the wildwood should have been heavy, damp, and clinging, but for some reason it was pleasantly light. His post-bath sweat was receding quickly as well.

"What's going on?" asked Alec.

Shiori looked up from where she was readying their meal near the tent. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I was just thinking that the air didn't feel so unpleasant anymore."

"Ah, if that's the case..." Shiori smiled brightly, but her hands didn't pause in preparing the food. "I used fire and wind magic to adjust the humidity within the barrier around the campsite. I thought it would be difficult to sleep well otherwise, and I reused the water I pulled from the air to prepare the bath."

"I-I see."

It was quite an extravagant way to use magic. While Alec was admiring her unexpected and inconceivable application of magic, Shiori completed the preparations for their meal, and Ellen, the physicker, finished her bath.

After a moment's indecision, Ellen spoke, hesitantly. "I'm so sorry to ask this of you right before we eat. I wonder if you might dry my hair for me. I've heard the rumors, and couldn't help but be curious."

"Of course," said Shiori. "If you'd just sit here facing away from me, please."

Was something about to happen?

Alec watched Ellen with great interest as she quietly did as she'd been told and sat on the ground. Shiori held her hands slightly apart from each other and called up her magical formulae—fire magic in her right hand, wind magic in her left. The two weak magics melted together to form a pleasantly warm breeze.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Alec interjected. His eyes had flown wide at the sight of

multiple magics not only being executed simultaneously, but being combined—something which was said to be of the highest difficulty. And here it was, being executed as though it were nothing. “Hold on. Even the greatest of mages have little success with combining two different forms of magic. You’re a low-level mage, right? What’s going on here?”

“Yes, you’re quite correct,” said Shiori, as she applied the warm wind to Ellen’s hair. Little by little, Ellen’s damp hair dried, and the beautiful golden strands fluttered in the breeze. “I’m good at detailed work, and it seems that making minute adjustments is much easier with small amounts of magical power. That’s all.”

She said it so casually. Did she have any idea how significant it was? It wasn’t as if none of the greatest mages—the ones whose names would be left in the annals of history—had ever succeeded in the feat. Even so, the combining of multiple forms of magic was a long-held dream of mages and the subject of never-ending study.

Once Ellen’s hair had been thoroughly dried by the warm wind, Shiori applied a cold wind to settle the strands.

“Amazing,” Ellen murmured, as she lightly stroked her lustrous golden hair with her fingertips. “I’d heard the rumors, but you really can combine magics, can’t you?”

“A mage I teamed up with before has tried it a couple of times,” said Clemens, “but the magic always seems to end up biased to one side. Instead of combining, one extinguishes the other. That same mage hopes to collaborate with you in researching it one day.”

As if embarrassed at Clemens’s words, Shiori’s face reddened. Smiling, she said, “The food is going to get cold. We should eat while it’s still warm.”

Though Alec wasn’t fully satisfied with her explanation, he took the dish that was offered to him. Piled high on the divided plate were pork, glistening an amber color and redolent of spices, and pilaf. He was also handed a cup, filled to the brim with a golden soup that had vegetable scraps and odd bits of pork floating in it. Someone gulped loudly.

“All right,” said Shiori, “please enjoy.”

“Thank you for the food!”



Linus had begun greedily devouring the food without waiting for Shiori's cue, and Alec shot him a sidelong glance before tasting the pork himself. In theory, he should have started with the soup, but Alec just could not resist the flavorsome, appetite-stimulating aroma. A sauce with an exquisite balance of saltiness and sweetness, and the savory taste of smoky, roasted pork spread throughout his mouth. The aroma of ginger and garlic accompanied this rich flavor, tickling his nose.

It was delicious. He began to chew faster, and in the blink of an eye, he'd finished it off, though the sauce that had all those delectable flavors melted into it remained in the bottom of his dish.

A shame it will go to waste, Alec thought. He glanced to the side and noticed Clemens scraping the sauce into his pilaf and mixing them together.

What a clever idea. That way, you'd be able to eat everything without leaving any sauce behind. Impressed, Alec brought some pilaf and sauce to his mouth. The pilaf, cooked to be light and airy, blended exquisitely with the thick, rich sauce. This was delicious too. Once he'd finished the soup—all of the flavorful broth and every little scrap of vegetable—all that was left were his empty dishes and a bulging belly. Though the portions hadn't been large, the unexpected hot bath and the delicious food left him completely satisfied.

That on its own was impressive enough, but Shiori had said she'd prepare their beds before tidying up and doing the laundry. Alec was surprised that Shiori could have more in store for them. Were there even beds deserving of the name to be prepared in the first place? At most, all she'd need to do was lay out some sleeping bags and blankets.

When Alec next looked at her, Shiori was searching the ground a little ways away from the fire with her hands. She seemed to decide on a spot and then she activated her earth magic. As he watched, the ground smoothed and flattened, then the dirt transformed into fine, soft grains. While that was happening, Shiori activated wind magic in one hand and evaporated the moisture from the soil. When that was finished, the dry grains of earth slowly compacted to form a clean, clear, level area big enough for everyone to sleep on. When Alec touched it, he thought he would feel compacted ground, but it

wasn't as hard as he'd expected. In fact, it had just the right amount of springiness.

"Please take your rest here," said Shiori. "It isn't as good as a real bed, but I think it should be a little better than sleeping on normal ground."

"No, I'm very grateful," said Alec. "Even this much makes a tremendous difference. I think I'll be able to rest very comfortably."

With dinner finished, the other members secured their individual sleeping areas and began preparing for the next day by tending to their gear. Once that was done, they retired for the night after agreeing that they would keep watch in turns of three hours, with two people per shift. As Shiori wanted time to prepare for the morning meal, she requested the last shift. If there were two people on each watch prior to hers, it would mean that Shiori would be alone for her turn. She said that her slime familiar—whose name was Rurii—had the ability to sense danger, so she'd be fine, but Alec was still uneasy about it. He decided to put himself forward for the duty. He was used to traveling alone, so a little loss of sleep wouldn't present much of a problem.

With the sleeping arrangements settled, Shiori called up water with her magic and used it to wash the dishes. Rurii happily drank up all the water that drained off. Once everything was dried with wind magic and packed away in her knapsack, next up was the washing and a bath for herself.

Interested, Linus called out to her. "How do you do the laundry?"

"Would you like to watch?" asked Shiori.

Seemingly intrigued, both Linus and Ellen drew closer. Clemens had seen it before, so he continued tending his dual swords, but his mouth curved upwards slightly, as though he found the behavior of his travel companions adorable.

Shiori pulled out several pieces of fine mesh that had been sewn into bag shapes from her knapsack. Apparently, they were called laundry nets. She divided up the dirty clothes by their owners, and placed them into the bags.

"Washing can be a little tough on clothes," said Shiori, "so I use these to help protect the fabric."

As she spoke, she used her magic to create a column of water. She dissolved

some soap shavings in it, then tossed in the laundry nets. With that done, she began to pour magical power into the pillar of water to start up a gentle current within it. The laundry nets spun around and around, and a faint scent of soap wafted through the air.

“In the case of delicate things, like silk or lace, or if something is very dirty, nothing but hand washing will do,” Shiori told them. “But for sweat and dust, this will get things clean enough.”

After a few minutes, she removed the laundry nets. She sent the dirty water outside the barrier, down a gutter she’d made with earth magic. Shiori then created another pillar of water, added a little fruit vinegar to it, and tossed the laundry nets back in.

“Why did you add the vinegar?” asked Alec.

“The acidity of the vinegar counteracts the alkalinity of the soap. This way, they’ll turn out soft and fluffy when they dry.”

Alec paused for a moment, then said, “I see.”

He hadn’t quite understood the beginning of her explanation, but, in short, it would make the washing turn out better. As he watched, the current started back up within the water column and the clothes finished their rinse. Shiori removed them, brushed them with her hands to straighten them and remove wrinkles, and used wind magic to remove some of the water. After that, she hung everything from a rope she’d strung from some tree branches.

“She’s really good at this...” Linus’s voice was little more than a whisper as he watched Shiori move fluidly through her work. Ellen and Alec added their agreement.

Once she’d finished hanging things up, Alec had thought that would be the end of it, but Shiori invoked combined wind and fire magics to create a warm breeze that enveloped the damp clothes. The thinner pieces very quickly began to dry, and the moisture on the surfaces of the thicker fabrics started to evaporate. By this point, Alec had decided not to pay any mind to the fact that, once again, combined magics were being used as though it were inconsequential.

“It would, of course, be much too difficult for me to keep this up until everything was completely dry,” said Shiori, “so I’ll just get rid of most of the dampness. If we leave them hung up like this, they will be dry by morning.”

“Incredible!” Linus cried in admiration.

Meanwhile, Ellen looked deep in thought, perhaps pondering something to do with the application of magic.

Truly impressive, thought Alec.

He didn’t give voice to these words of praise, but on the inside, he was astounded. She had completely mastered the use of her magic. At first glance, what she did looked like magic on a grand scale, but the amount of magical power she actually expended wasn’t very much at all. That was probably also the reason she didn’t look tired in spite of firing off magics in rapid succession. Additionally, the fact that her low level of magical power would just about fully recover with a night’s rest was a definite advantage. Shiori had taken her weaknesses and turned them into strengths. Other adventurers might do well to learn from her example.

“Well then,” said Shiori, “I will go have my bath now.”

Such were the thoughts that crossed Alec’s mind as he watched Shiori disappear into the bathing tent.

The next morning, Alec woke refreshed. He wouldn’t go so far as to say he was completely recovered, but given the fact that he was camping, it was more than sufficient. Though the light was still dim, he cleared away his bedding and did some simple stretches. Ready to dress for the day, he took a step forw—

“Wha—?!”

Realizing there was a large puddle of water where his foot had been about to land, he hurriedly pulled it back. But why was there a puddle there in the first place? Had it rained or something? Alec turned his gaze to the sky, then looked around, but saw no evidence of any such thing. While he was wondering about the puddle, it began to wriggle back and forth, and before he knew it, it had shifted into a domed shape, like a steamed yeast bun. Upon seeing the familiar

form, Alec let out a breath.

“Don’t scare me,” said Alec. “That was you, Rurii?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Shiori, who had woken up before him. “When it feels relaxed, it reverts to its original form.”

Alec paused. “When it...feels relaxed...”

He had no idea whether slimes could feel relaxed or tense, but since this familiar’s master said it was so, it must be true. It was probably best not to think too deeply about it.

Part of Rurii’s body extended in a snaking motion, making it look just like it had raised an arm. Feeling as though he had been greeted with a friendly “Hey there!”, Alec replied with a quick, “Hey, good morning.”

It seemed he’d responded correctly. Rurii quivered, jelly-like, with satisfaction, then moved to Shiori’s side.

“Good morning,” said Shiori.

Already dressed and fully groomed, Shiori held out a small washbasin she’d filled with her water magic, as though telling him he should use it to wash. Alec gave her a brief word of thanks, then washed his face, rinsed out his mouth, and finished tidying his appearance. He happened to glance down as he went to discard the used water and met the gaze of Rurii, who was looking up at him longingly. At least, that was the feeling Alec got in spite of the fact that it didn’t really have a face.

Alec spoke to it. “If you want something to drink, get someone to share some fresh water or soup with you.” He was reluctant to give the slime the dirty water he’d used for his morning wash. Once he’d said that, Rurii quietly returned to its master’s side.

Having several conversational exchanges with the slime had shown Alec that mutual understanding was definitely possible. As the composition of its body—a gelatinous mass containing a sort of nucleus within—was so simple, the question of what organ it might be using to think was a complete mystery. However, the fact that it served Shiori as a familiar was proof that it had a high level of intelligence.

With preparations for the morning meal finished, Shiori began to read using a light she'd conjured with her magic. Rurii amused itself, quickly changing shapes and playing on its own. As Alec idly watched them, dawn broke and the rest of their party members began to get out of bed.

Breakfast was bread that had been toasted to crunchiness; soup, left over from the night before and warmed up; and broiled sausage meat. Alec tore off a piece of bread, dipped it in the soup, and ate it. Then, he had a bite of the herby sausage. It was all simple fare, but the fact that it was a warm meal served as a tremendous source of energy.

I see... thought Alec. So this is a housekeeping mage.

Manipulating magic at will to create a comfortable environment for the other party members and to take care of their daily needs while adventuring—that was a housekeeping mage. Shiori's unique profession would certainly prove to be a boon on gloomy expeditions.

2

The second day passed as smoothly as the first for the party, and by the third night, they'd all gained a thorough understanding of Shiori's abilities. It was precisely because they were all seasoned adventurers, who had completed countless quests and evaded death any number of times, that they could see exactly what a treasure she was.

If camping for a long period was required to fulfill a client's request, that alone was enough to render the difficulty level high. Poor meals of preserved foods, sleeping in uncomfortable conditions, and the feeling of growing dirtier by the day—no matter how accustomed to it a person might be, over time, such things chip away at both body and spirit. Fatigue builds up, little by little, dulling both movement and judgment. Once that happens, it becomes difficult to utilize one's true abilities, and that directly affects the outcome of the job—its success or failure. At times, it even puts lives at risk.

But what if, amidst all of that, there were someone who would monitor everyone's conditions and look after them—what then?

As Alec sipped his post-meal restorative herb tea within the comfortable confines of the camp's barrier, he watched Shiori diligently and efficiently completing her work.

"Hey," said Alec. "You seem to be working as a solo-type. Aren't you going to join a party? With how hard you work, there must be no shortage of demand for you."

"Alec!" Clemens hurriedly shouted an admonition. The relaxed atmosphere of the camp had frozen over with Alec's casual words. Shiori's gentle expression grew strained.

Blast. Was this something he shouldn't have brought up?

"Everyone treats me very kindly," said Shiori, "but I am just a low-level mage. If I stayed anywhere for too long, I would only prove to be a hindrance."

There was a trace of bitterness to her words. Sensing something very like pain, Alec silently chided himself. He'd been tactless. Everyone had something they didn't want others to touch on. That included himself.

After a pause, Shiori spoke, averting her eyes. "I'll go have my bath now."

Perhaps feeling like she couldn't stay there another moment, Shiori turned and slipped into the bathing tent as though she were running away. Rurii bounced once in a manner that seemed reproachful, then followed after its master.

The tension in the air slackened a little, and someone let out a sigh.

Alec hesitated. "Sorry. I've made things uncomfortable."

"You couldn't help it," said Ellen, casting a worried glance toward the tent. "You didn't know."

There was a brief silence, and then...

"She was..." Linus spoke in short, quiet bursts, "abandoned...by her last party."

Alec paused before asking, "Abandoned?"

It wasn't a pleasant subject, but it was common in the world of adventurers.

The weak were cast aside. No matter how much you'd been through together, if a person proved to be too much of a burden, that person would be urged to withdraw from the party.

Almost as though he'd guessed Alec's line of thought, Linus's usually good-natured expression twisted with bitterness.

"I don't mean that figuratively," he said. "I mean that they literally abandoned her."

About four years earlier, when Zack was still active as an adventurer, he'd taken an Eastern woman under his care while on a job. He'd found her collapsed and unconscious in a forest. When she regained consciousness, those who had taken care of her were baffled. They couldn't understand each other's languages. When they finally managed to communicate somewhat, through gestures and body language, all they were able to learn was that her name was Shiori. Being that she was from a different ethnic group, and the fact that she was clearly in some kind of unusual situation, she was too much for them to handle. However, they couldn't just leave an unknown woman on her own, so they entrusted her to the Guild.

After some time had passed and she had learned enough to be able to have ordinary conversations, everyone was surprised to learn that the person they had assumed to be a girl in her early teens from her appearance, was actually a full-grown woman who had already passed her mid-twenties. However, while it was good that they were able to learn her age and the name of the nation she had come from, no country matching that name appeared on their maps. Perhaps it was a country so small it didn't appear on a map. Or else she might be from some as-yet undiscovered tribe. Opinions within the Guild were split, but no conclusion was ever reached. She didn't even know why she had collapsed in that place, or how and from whence she had gotten there.

Shiori herself appeared to give up the idea of returning to her homeland.

That aside, as she was a grown woman, she needed to secure work to provide a living for herself. To start off, she began helping at the Guild. While doing chores and odd jobs in the dining hall and for the clerical staff, she studied

language, history, and culture. Perhaps because she was desperate to survive, she absorbed everything very quickly, and she learned everything she might need to assuage that hunger.

Though it had been thought that Shiori might have come from some remote tribe, by the time she was able to live on her own, there were very few people who still believed that. Her deportment, the way she thought about things, the way she learned, the way she made use of her knowledge—it was clear from all and any of these things that she had been raised in a highly sophisticated culture.

That said, there weren't any places that would hire an Easterner, already so rarely encountered, and one with unusual circumstances at that. In the end, Shiori decided to go ahead and register as an adventurer. The Adventurers' Guild served, in part, as a repository for people with complicated situations, so even someone with circumstances like hers would be accepted with no issues so long as she passed the test.

She passed the examination without difficulty, and proved positive for magical power in the aptitude test. However, the amount of magical power she possessed was extraordinarily low, rendering it uncertain whether she would be able to perform the work of an average mage. Shiori chose that path anyway. She said that she didn't mind because she wasn't looking to be very successful, merely for a way to make a living.

That was how Shiori became an adventurer. She searched for lost items and picked medicinal herbs. She did not balk at taking on the client requests that other new adventurers tried to avoid: boring jobs that were a lot of trouble for very little pay. Through that work, she steadily gained rewards and marks for experience.

With the quality of her character and her conscientious work style, she achieved a certain measure of trust, and parties began inviting her to join them. They were temporary positions, making up numbers or filling vacancies, but even in that, she gained definite recognition. To make up for being useless in battle, she undertook all routine tasks during the expedition, and worked to the best of her ability to contribute to the party.

After a few months, rumors had spread to the point that even the Guild was aware of them. If you had her with you, even camping would prove comfortable. And in addition to having a pleasant camping experience, if Shiori was with you, your success rate would increase. Any party that wanted to improve its results even slightly actively worked to hire her. The cozy camp environment she prepared with her magic, and all the little signs of care she showed, definitely increased morale. Having found her own unique means of survival, Shiori steadily gained marks for experience and increased her level. In recognition of her efforts, she was promoted to D-rank.

Then, about a year and a half after Shiori had become an adventurer, she was invited to join a party called Akatsuki, the name being a word for “dawn.” And they wanted her to become an official member. The party was comprised of D-rank adventurers who were aiming to become C-rank, but their recent results hadn’t been very good. They had their minds set on gaining Shiori’s abilities.

With no experience working in a fixed party, and knowing how little magical power she had, Shiori seemed quite conflicted. But the ardent invitations, and, most likely, her own desire for a place where she belonged, made her decide to join the party.

The problem Akatsuki had was the lack of balance in their party composition. It was the reason for the slump in their results. When they were E-rank, they’d only taken on quests where brute-force attacks worked, or ventures that could be completed within a day. Because of this, even their skewed party structure, with four out of five of them being vanguards, hadn’t posed a problem. However, when they became D-rank and the number of quests that required a few days’ worth of camping or complex decision-making skills increased, everything gradually grew more difficult for them.

That was when Shiori and her ability to provide appropriate support joined the party, and everything changed. The fatigue they built up didn’t carry over into the next day, and since they could expect to recover well, they were better able to handle a little overexertion. The party’s completion rate rose. They gained marks for experience, and the acquisition of the scores necessary for promotion progressed smoothly.

Shiori, who had no relations, had found a place where she belonged. When

she began showing signs that she had become particularly close to the magic swordsman in her party, those who had been watching over her, including Zack, felt relieved.

But three months later, strange things began to happen. The first to notice was a herbalist physician who worked in the same branch she did.

There's a difference in the quality of their equipment, he thought.

As Akatsuki's recent results had been good, they appeared to be prospering. The party members had bought replacements for their equipment. It was all quite impressive compared to what they'd had a few months earlier. Shiori was the only one who had the same gear as before. Perhaps it was that she wasn't particular about her equipment. Or, perhaps...

He knew that, unlike the vanguards, who confronted adversaries directly, the equipment needs of those in the rear guard tended to be addressed later. The visible difference between Shiori and the woman who was also a rear guard was troubling, but sometimes rewards were divided differently with newcomers, so he felt he couldn't really say anything. A slight uneasy feeling nagged at him, but on that occasion, he didn't pursue it any further.

After that, however, things gradually grew worse. Shiori slowly stopped appearing at Akatsuki's post-expedition banquets, and the sight of them celebrating without her gave others the sense that something wasn't right.

Soon, the long-standing members of the party had been promoted to C-rank, but Shiori remained D-rank. Looking at the way they'd flourished after Shiori had joined them, it seemed obvious that her contributions had had an impact. In spite of that, her assessments were low.

Around six months later, people began to notice Shiori's party members treating her cruelly, with no regard for who might be watching. The bizarre nature of their relationship became conspicuous, and people began to wonder if Shiori was being exploited. She followed after her party members with an expression as vacant as a doll's. Her equipment was so worn out it couldn't possibly serve its purpose. Such were the rumors that began to circulate in whispers.

Weren't their good results a direct consequence of what Shiori had done for

them? If that were so, then why did they treat her that way? More than a few people went to voice their opinions to the Guild, but Ranvald Lumbeck, the Master at the time, took no notice of them.

“To prevent iniquity in the receipt of rewards,” said Ranvald, “the division and distribution of them is handled by the Guild. Akatsuki is the same as everyone else in this respect. There is no question that Shiori is receiving her share of the rewards. On the subject of her lack of promotion, that decision was based solely on the fact that she does not contribute as much as the others.”

Once he’d given that statement, he’d refused to engage any further. And it was true that whenever they came back from completing a job and their marks for experience were assessed, Shiori’s scores were exceedingly low.

Her party members didn’t even try to hide their dissatisfaction with her. While things had been good at the beginning, their results had been trending downward again. Though they never failed outright, their low completion rate made their results feel even less satisfying. And Shiori was no longer able to work to her own satisfaction either. She didn’t move well on the road, becoming more and more of a burden.

If that were the case, then surely everything could have been resolved if Shiori left the group. And yet, perhaps because of some perceived advantage for themselves, they refused to let her go. Shiori herself had begun to avoid other adventurers, only appearing at the Guild to collect her share of the rewards. Aside from those times when she did regular shopping or went out of town on a job, she simply holed herself up somewhere. Even on those shopping outings, one of her party members was always glued to her side, as though they were keeping watch on her. A colleague of Shiori’s who was worried for her visited her lodgings, and was told that she’d moved out.

Something wasn’t right.

Zack tended to be away from home a lot on jobs, so it wasn’t until things had reached this point that he learned of Shiori’s situation. He asked for volunteers to help as he began an independent investigation, and very quickly had enough interested parties. There were some among them who showed up because they were upset that they couldn’t benefit from Shiori’s abilities, what with her time

being completely monopolized. But, of course, a great many of the volunteers were genuinely worried for her, as honest and hardworking as she was.

Interviewing people who worked at the Guild and at neighboring shops turned up several facts. For the last few months, Shiori had been paying for all the party members' food and other consumables. As some had suspected, there were no signs of Shiori ever buying new equipment after joining the party. And the instances of the other party members doing things like custom ordering new equipment, or frequenting purveyors of entertainments, had increased.

Another point of concern was that, about three months earlier, the party had begun accepting requests with difficulty levels that didn't match their abilities. Perhaps their run of successes had given them a taste for it. Or, maybe they simply overestimated themselves. And it had been around that same time that Shiori had begun to behave strangely.

Upon close inspection, there appeared to be evidence of tampering in Shiori's records, with regards to her marks for experience and her assessments. There seemed to be something peculiar going on with the reward amounts and difficulty levels recorded for the requests the party had accepted, as well. Someone was perpetrating some kind of fraud. And someone working at the Guild—most likely the Master, Ranvald—had had a hand in it.

There was no mistaking it. Shiori was being bled dry. Her party was making her shoulder the blame for the slump in their results, and forcing her to spend her own money for the sake of the party as a form of punishment. All of her share of the rewards was lost to the party's expenses, and she had nothing left to buy herself better equipment. And on top of all the mental and emotional abuse she suffered, she was made to accompany them on jobs that were beyond their capacities.

As the party was mostly made up of men in their working prime, the amount of money it took to purchase their food and drink, plus all the consumables required for an expedition, was nothing to be sneezed at. Shiori was being made to pay for all of it in their place, and the money they would have used for those expenses was going into their pockets instead. With her bearing all of their costs, it made complete sense that they didn't want to let her go.

Just as Zack and the others had finished gathering all the evidence and were about to go charging in with it, the incident occurred. The party had gone on a quest that they'd arranged themselves, without going through the Guild, and they'd returned without Shiori.

What had happened to her? Everyone pressed them for answers. Their leader, a swordsman, answered without a hint of guilt or shame.

"Shiori received a mortal wound and could no longer move," he said. "As our own lives were under immediate threat, there was nothing we could do. Please don't criticize us."

He said that they'd acted according to the Adventurers' Emergency Escape Law, which states that "if while on an expedition one's life is at immediate risk, abandoning injured parties in order to affect a retreat will not be regarded as an illegal act under the law."

Zack pressed them, demanding that they at least tell him where she was, but they stubbornly refused to say anything. They maintained that, due to confidentiality, they could not disclose their destination or the identity of the person who had hired them.

"You're saying you'd take your duty of confidentiality over the life of a comrade?" asked Zack. "She was still alive, right? It's not too late! If you guys can't go, then I will!" Even if it were too late, he wanted to be able to mourn her properly.

The C-rank party trembled at the S-rank Zack's intimidating manner, but they still refused to give any details.

"Our client is a high-ranking noble of the Empire," they said. "We've been forbidden to speak, in no uncertain terms, and received additional compensation for it. If we expose everything and things go wrong, it will cause trouble for us. Please, just let it go."

Once they'd said that, it was difficult to press them any further. While the kingdom was in a diplomatic relationship with the Empire, it was an extremely complex and fragile one. The people of the Empire were very proud, and the idea that they were the chosen ones was strong with them. It was all too clear that offending one of their high-ranking nobles would bring trouble.

But then, what about Shiori? Even if someone were to investigate, it had been a direct request. There wouldn't be any records of it at the Guild. The party remained doggedly opposed to revealing any information, but they did say that the place had been hard to find and they couldn't remember the precise location.

A few days passed with a heavy air of gloom hanging over the Guild. Zack and the others did everything they could, but the person who had made the request hadn't visited Tris before they'd left, so there weren't any clues to be found.

Was there nothing else they could try?

When everyone was on the verge of giving up, word came that Shiori had returned. She was outside the West Gate of Tris. A bright blue slime, the color of ruri stones and lapis lazuli, was carrying her collapsed form, protecting her. Shiori was just barely conscious, but she was in a perilous state, being terribly weak with a very high fever. Through a tremendous effort in treatment and care, Shiori narrowly escaped death, but she was confined to bed for many days of deep sleep.

During all that time, the bright blue slime never left her side for even a moment. Shiori had said that the slime was the one who carried her all the way back. Apparently, it had felt a debt of gratitude for the food she had shared with it.

Yet, even with all that...the mortal wound her party members had spoken of was nowhere to be seen on Shiori's body. And, however much risk there might have been to their lives, there had been four full-grown men present. Had not a single one of them thought to carry Shiori, with her girlishly small build, out of there?

Even when they'd learned of Shiori's return, far from being happy, their expressions showed nothing but uneasiness. When Zack and the others pressed them further, saying there must have been something going on, the swordsman whom everyone had thought was Shiori's sweetheart finally confessed.

"We went into the labyrinth as guards for the nobles," he said. "While we were in there, we got our hands on a lot of different kinds of equipment. Our clients said that as long as they obtained their primary objective, we could keep

everything else...”

He went on to say that when Shiori had collapsed during the journey from the effects of months of overwork, it had been the nobles who ordered them to leave her behind. To them, with such a deeply rooted idea of aristocratic superiority, the life of one adventurer woman was a trifling matter. They had vehemently insisted that the job should take precedence over Shiori, and the party had acceded to their will. Rather than bringing her back, burden as she was, they had chosen to carry home even more spoils from their venture. Having, at long last, only just reached a mid-level rank, the prospect had been desperately attractive to them.

And that was the reason they’d given for abandoning Shiori, all alone, in the depths of the labyrinth.

“What an appalling story.” The tale had been so atrocious it made Alec feel sick. To be treated like a mere tool by your colleagues, then discarded like garbage—such acts flew in the face of all that was human.

Perhaps remembering those days, Clemens’s handsome face had contracted into a frown.

“So, what happened to Akatsuki, or whatever they were called?” asked Alec. “They couldn’t have gotten away without some kind of penalty.”

“The five of them continued to insist that monsters really had appeared and they’d had to run away,” said Clemens. “There wasn’t any way to substantiate their testimony, but there wasn’t any way to disprove it either. In the end, they didn’t face any kind of censure you could really call a penalty. All that happened was that the Master involved was dismissed. But, well, without Shiori, they had a rough time, failing one expedition after another. It just showed that the reason they’d been able to scrape by before was because Shiori had been with them. What finished things off was when the woman in their party died. It made it hard for them to stay here, so they transferred to a different branch.”

“I see,” said Alec, after a moment. He turned his eyes toward the tent.

What had Shiori thought when she was discarded by the companions she’d finally found for herself? What had she felt, delirious with fever, left all alone in

the depths of a labyrinth where no one ventured?

Shiori emerged, having finished her bath. She seemed self-conscious, keeping her head down, and disappeared behind the tent to attend to the laundry.

Alec saw this and said, "I'll go check on her."

It might have been better to leave her alone, but the loneliness he'd seen in her as she'd walked away worried him. When Alec reached the back of the tent, he found Shiori sitting on the ground, staring absently up at the washing spinning around in a pillar of water. Rurii sat next to her, as though cuddling its master. And Alec heard, ever so faintly, the sound of singing.

Was it a song from her homeland? Alec couldn't understand the meaning of the unfamiliar words spun together in the song, but the foreign melody that drifted through the air resounded with a profound sweetness and melancholy that pierced his heart.

After a moment, he spoke. "Shiori."

Caught up in an illusion that her fragile form might suddenly disappear, Alec had called her name without realizing it.

The song came to a stop, and Shiori turned to look at him.

"It was rude of me to ask that earlier," said Alec. "I'm sorry."

"Not at all," said Shiori, smiling. "It's fine." She thanked him for his concern and for taking the trouble to check on her.

"Well, I mean," said Alec, "we are companions, after all."

Shiori's eyes flew wide at his words, before gently narrowing in a smile.

"I'm happy you think of me that way," said Shiori. "As a companion."

Alec didn't understand exactly what meaning the word held for Shiori, but he did know that what he'd said had touched her in a tender part of her heart.

"All right," he said, "I'll help out so we can all get to bed early. Tomorrow, we'll be suppressing the manticore."

"Yes," said Shiori.

Alec offered his hand to her. Shiori had been waiting for the washing to finish,

but she took it, hesitantly, and Alec helped her to her feet.

Shiori was a strong woman who'd returned to her work despite all the hardships she'd endured. And yet, somehow, there was a precarious fragility to her. Alec nearly pulled her close and wrapped her in an embrace right there and then, but he stopped himself just in time.

3

The next day, fully rested thanks to Shiori's thoughtful attentions, the party finally reached the manticore's lair. And, perhaps in response to its sensing their presence, the bloodlust in the air grew strong enough to sting their skin.

While each of them readied their particular weapons and skills, Linus spoke in a carefree way, as if to break the tension. "Once we've safely defeated the manticore, I want to eat some of that chicken karaage Shiori makes."

Clemens stared at him a moment, then grinned.

"In that case," he said, "I'll have grilled yakitori skewers. I want to try them as a side dish with some alcohol."

"I think I'll have the fruit in mint syrup," said Ellen. "Having dessert while camping is such an indulgence."

First Clemens, then Ellen chimed in. Well, now. Getting a favorite food as a reward wasn't a bad deal at all. Entering into the spirit of things, Alec gave voice to his own request.

"Then I'll have the pork shogayaki, or whatever it was called," he said. "I've taken a liking to that rich sauce."

"Everyone wants something different!" Shiori laughed. "Very well. Tonight's menu will be everyone's favorites!"

In spite of the formidable opponent ahead of them, they all let out a cheer. Morale was high. They could do this.

As Alec imbued his prized sword with magic, he asked, "And what about you, Shiori? Is there something you want?"

“Me?” Shiori blinked, perhaps not having expected someone to ask her.
“Well, I suppose... What I want is—”

Her words were lost, drowned out by a heavy bass roar. Overwhelmingly powerful winds shook the trees, and a grotesque, human-faced magical beast appeared.

“Let’s go!”

They exploded into battle.

“That’s definitely a manticore,” Zack confirmed, after inspecting the head. He gave a huge sigh, and continued, “This request has been successfully completed. Good work.”

The moment he said it, the whole Guild hall erupted in cheers.

“That’s Alec for you,” said someone in the crowd. “They aren’t lying when they say he’s nearly S-rank.”

“I wish I could’ve seen Clemens using his dual sword technique,” said a male voice.

“When it comes to magical beasts that fly, you can’t leave Linus out!” someone exclaimed. “His dynamic vision is so far beyond the norm, they say he can fell birds in flight!”

“Look,” said a female voice, “they don’t seem tired and they’re hardly injured at all. I guess it’s true that if you have Ellen or Shiori with you, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Standing with his party and surrounded by people singing their praises, Alec glanced back toward Zack. Their eyes met.

“Well,” said Zack, “how did you like my secret weapon?”

“She’s magnificent,” Alec replied. “Traveling was so comfortable that we never felt tired.”

Zack looked pleased by the unrestrained praise.

Alec paused, then asked, “So, is she with anyone right now?”

“Huh? I told you she’s a solo adventurer.” Though he seemed to have misunderstood Alec’s question, Zack gave him a smile that spoke volumes.

“That’s not what I meant,” said Alec. “I meant, does she have anyone special in her life right now?”

Zack’s cheerful grin disappeared, and he pierced Alec with a searching gaze.

“She doesn’t,” he said. “And what of it?”

“I’ve taken a liking to her. I’m going to have that woman for my own.”

“What did you say?” A dangerous light gleamed in Zack’s eyes. With a gaze that could have shot down a dragon, he brought his face closer to Alec’s and spoke in a quiet, menacing voice.

“The difference between your standing and hers is far too great. If anything goes wrong, she’ll be the one who gets hurt,” he said. “If you’re just planning to play with her on some rich boy’s whim of yours, then go satisfy your needs at a brothel like you usually do. And what happened to you hating women?”

Zack might have retired from the front lines and mellowed out quite a bit, but his S-rank status wasn’t just for show. The anger he unleashed was akin to murderous intent, but Alec calmly took the full force of it head-on and curved his lips into the shape of a smile.

“Who’s playing?” said Alec. “I’m serious. I’ve devoted my entire life to working for the good of the kingdom. At this point, even if I ask that I be allowed to marry a woman I love, it won’t bring down any punishment from on high. Besides, my reputation for hating women is a misunderstanding. What I hate is women who fawn and flatter.”

That’s right. He was drawn to that woman—a rare and uncommon woman whose ideas were unfettered by common practices, who had the courage to turn her weaknesses into advantages, and who possessed the strength to try to stand on her own. Even in the midst of their journey, she had been scrupulous in her care and consideration. And her face was so gentle and calm, with such subtle expressions of emotion.

More than anything else, as exceptional as she was, she was unaffected and homey—exactly what he’d craved for so many years.

“That’s easy enough to say, but you know people aren’t going to keep quiet about it,” said Zack. “And it isn’t you who’s going to get held up and criticized, it’s her. You ought to know that.”

It was unusual for Zack to argue so vehemently. Alec gave him a fierce smile.

“You’re being surprisingly tenacious about this,” he said. “Could it be that you just don’t want to let her go, Your Grace, my Lord Duke?”

A savage grin lit Zack’s face as if to say he was happy to rise to Alec’s provocation.

“I’m the one who found her,” said Zack. “She’s like a little sister to me. As her big brother, it’s only natural for me to want her to be happy, right? She’s already been hurt enough. I’ll never forgive anyone who does anything that might hurt her more. Not even you, Your Highness, His Majesty the King’s elder brother.”

Ignoring the hubbub all around them, the two glared at each other in a private standoff. It was Zack who eventually looked away first.

“I don’t ever want to see her hurt again,” said Zack.

“I heard the story while we were traveling. Zack, the thing is, I want to give her a place where she belongs, where she can just be herself.”

Zack gave a short sigh, as if he’d given up.

“You’d better make good on those words,” he said. “If you think you can do it, then go ahead and give it a try, Aleksey.”

“Thanks. Just leave it to me, Bleyzac.”

“Well, I suppose... What I want is—”

The words that had come after that, the ones which had nearly been drowned out, were, “somewhere I belong.” Her voice had been faint, but her wish had definitely reached Alec’s ears.

She was such a strong woman. But it had been those fragile expressions she showed so fleetingly that had lit a fire in his heart. The forlorn feeling of being in a strange land with an uncertain future and status was something he

understood all too well. Which is why, if she would allow it, he wanted to be an anchor for her, a support her heart could rely upon.

“Shiori.”

After finally being released from the excited crowd, the temporary party members all bid each other farewell and left the Guild behind them. As Shiori walked away, Alec called out to her. Set against a backdrop of shops and houses painted in a deepening twilight, Shiori turned to look at him.

“After we defeated the manticore, you were kind enough to fulfill all of our wishes with your cooking,” said Alec. “But did you get what you wanted?”

Shiori stayed silent. Alec took her hand and placed a courtly kiss on her fingertips, as a knight might.

“If you so wished it,” he said, “I would be that place for you. A place where you belong.”

As he watched her face redden with a blush, a thought crossed his mind.

Now then, how shall I go about winning her heart?

And as he imagined the days ahead—days that were sure to prove enjoyable—the corners of his mouth edged upward in a smile.

Chapter 2: Making Portable Foods to Order

1

Clatter, clatter, clatter...

The sound of horse-drawn carts passing below the window crept slowly into Shiori's awareness. The light that slipped through the gap in the curtains was soft, telling her that it was still early morning. As she listened to the occasional quick footsteps of people passing by and the chirping of the birds, Shiori enjoyed dozing in the warmth of her comforter before waking up properly.

Bong... Bong...

Beyond the curtain-covered window, the bells of the church rang out. Once, twice, thrice... Shiori counted six before the ringing stopped. Six in the morning. Time to get up.

Pushing her comforter aside, she sat up and stretched. Rurii, who was already awake, lay on the floor in the shape of a puddle, expanding and contracting with a bouncy suppleness. This appeared to be Rurii's version of morning exercises. At night before bed, Rurii expanded and contracted in a slightly different pattern, but those appeared to serve as pre-sleep stretches.

"Good morning, Rurii," said Shiori.

Upon being greeted, Rurii quickly reached up with a tentacle-like projection of its body. This was Rurii's way of returning the salutation.

Shiori had the feeling that when they'd first started living together, the slime had been much more slime-like. *It really is taking on more and more human characteristics.*

She got out of bed and changed into an indigo blue dress that had ivy embroidered on the hem and around the square neckline in undyed thread. It was something she often wore for work.

Shiori went into the bathroom and lined up two of the washbasins which

were stacked there, then used magic to fill them with water. When she placed one of them at her feet, Rurii reached out with two tentacles and splashed around inside it, mimicking the motions of face-washing. Every time Rurii did that, Shiori wondered what part of its body Rurii was actually cleaning. Once Rurii was done, it drank up all the water.

After washing her own face, Shiori gently dried it with her favorite linen towel, a product of the Commonwealth of Litoanya. Then she applied a light moisturizer that had been recommended to her by her colleague Nadia to even out her skin tone. She set it with a light layer of milk-white powder, dusted a pale rose color over her eyelids, and brushed a pink rouge over her lips to stain them ever so slightly. With that, the light, elegant makeup devised by Nadia was complete. Nadia herself wore heavy, bewitching makeup, so it was a little difficult for Shiori to understand how she'd come up with this look as well.

Shiori transferred the water she'd used for her ablutions into a small watering can, walked over to the window, and opened the curtains. From her apartment, she could see a morning in Tris spread out before her. Roofs of many colors stood in lines against a backdrop of clear blue sky. And beyond the roofs rose the spire of the cathedral, soaring above everything.

As she enjoyed the view, Shiori watered the potted plants on her veranda—all herbs, fruits, and vegetables. She plucked some crisp, fresh baby leaves from the plants growing in the larger pots along with one ripe tomato, and took everything into the kitchen. Her morning meal was to be a salad made from the nutritious, tender greens; multigrain bread she'd bought from Bread Studio Nilsson which was famed for being delicious; plus egged bacon.

She drizzled some fruit oil into a frying pan and rubbed a magic stone to light the stove. When the pan was hot, she laid down two slices of bacon and cracked an egg atop each one. Once the yolks had developed a thin film and the edges of the whites were fried to crackling, she took them off the heat. She got out rather large, flat plates and filled them with the salad, lightly toasted bread, and egged bacon. With that, breakfast was ready.

Rurii sat at her feet, waiting eagerly but politely. Shiori used magic to fill a bowl with water and set it out alongside a plate of the freshly made food. Rurii pitched forward for a moment, as if bowing, then began to eat. In the

beginning, Shiori had fretted over what food she should provide for the slime, but it turned out that Rurii would basically eat anything.

As she watched Rurii eat, Shiori began her own meal. First, she appeased her thirst with some fruit juice. Then, she tore off a small piece of bread and brought it to her mouth. It had a simple, rustic flavor, and the more she chewed, the more she tasted the sweetness of the grains, as well as a subtle saltiness.

“Yes, this is delicious. I’ll have to buy it again.”

Tap, tap.

A light pawing at her legs made Shiori look down. Rurii held out its empty bowl. Apparently, it wanted another serving of water. Shiori used magic to refill the bowl, and Rurii seemed happy as it drank it dry once more. Rurii drank soup and fruit juice, but magic water appeared to be its favorite.

Shiori finished her salad and started in on her egged bacon. A runny yolk would have made her happiest, but she knew she couldn’t expect the raw eggs to be of the same standard as the ones in Japan, so she made sure to cook them thoroughly. And given that the medical environment and technology here were of a level so low they could never hope to compare to Japan, she’d really rather not get food poisoning. Apparently, there were limits to the scope of what magical cures could accomplish.

Japan—the homeland to which she could never return, save for in her memories.

Bong...

Shiori started at the sound of the church bell. She looked at the clock and saw that it was seven. Time to get ready to go. Pushing aside the dull ache that seeped up from the depths of her heart, Shiori began to clear away the remains of their breakfast. Once she had finished tidying, she threw on a caped bolero jacket with a similar design to her dress; a broad-brimmed, conical hat; and a pair of boots. They were all items she’d purchased at a shop that specialized in equipment for mages. She slipped her arm through the strap of a shoulder bag stuffed full of homemade portable foods, and picked up a basket that was similarly packed.

“All right,” said Shiori. “Shall we go?”

Rurii, sitting at her feet, bounced once energetically in reply.

The Guild was only about five minutes away from her apartment. Many different businesses like grocers, general stores, and armorers lined the streets in-between, making the area very convenient for shopping. An apartment in an area so easy to live in was a little more expensive than in other parts, but Shiori liked it very much anyway as she often needed to purchase things for work.

The door to the Guild creaked as she opened it. Everyone waiting inside looked toward her at the same time. It nearly made her take a step back.

“Good morning,” she said.

“We’ve been waiting forever!”

When Shiori saw Linus—whom she’d become friendly with on the campaign the other day—approaching in such an exuberant mood and rubbing his hands together, she couldn’t help bursting into laughter.

Still... Shiori turned and looked around the room. She tended to arrive a little ahead of the time she’d set, but there were always so many of her colleagues gathered there before her. The thought that they counted on her made her very happy.

Focusing on the task at hand, Shiori said, “I will now distribute everyone’s orders!”

Excitement filled the room. Everyone was familiar with the system, so they lined up quickly and without confusion in front of the table where Shiori had laid out the portable foods.

“Boris.” Shiori spoke to the first person in line. “Six minestrone, two corn potage, and eight cheese risotto comes to three silvers and two coppers.”

“Here y’are. Thanks.”

“Karina,” Shiori addressed the next person. “Four each of the sliced pork char siu and egg drop soup comes to one silver and six coppers.”

“Thank you, Shiori.”

“Ludger, you have two braised eggplant nibitashi, four sautéed spinach, and six of the berry dessert soup. All together, that comes to two silvers and four coppers.”

“Yup, thanks. These really make a difference.”

“Hailard, three pumpkin potage, one rice and egg porridge, and two mushroom risotto comes to one silver and two coppers.”

“Ah, now I’ll be able to weather my next job,” said the old man in a thin, warbling voice. “Thank you so much, young lady.”

There was a long pause before Shiori replied. “Please take very good care of yourself.”

She continued to exchange the portable foods, each packed in a bag made of waxed paper, for coins according to her order sheet. To prevent their deterioration after purchase, she recommended that her customers place the foods, still wrapped in waxed paper, in a jar or other airtight container. And she reminded them to only purchase as much as they would eat on a single job.

Shiori had set things up so that if someone filled out the necessary information on her order form which listed all of the products she handled, then they could pick them up on her next sale day. There were some things that were available for purchase on the day of, but she wasn’t able to produce very much in terms of quantity. This system was one she had devised after calculating what she would be able to undertake on her own. It probably wasn’t very convenient for her customers, but it was likely that everyone was dissatisfied with the nutrition of their meals while camping. And this had all gotten its start when Shiori, worried about whether people were properly nourished on their campaigns, had begun sharing out the preserved foods she made. Those actions turned into this business which, on the whole, had been favorably received.

Adventurers did cook when they could manage it, but in general, meals on the road consisted of bread and dried meat. They looked forward to the meager luxury of items like canned foods or pickles. Shiori’s portable foods included a host of vegetables that were hard to take on a campaign, so word of them had spread among her colleagues in the blink of an eye. And the fact that they were

so easy to use—light, compact, and quickly ready with the addition of hot water—made them talk about all the more. Many people even ate the fruits, for example, as a snack just as they were.

“You seem to be prospering.”

The familiar baritone made Shiori look up, and her gaze met the blue eyes of a man with lightly tanned skin and unruly silver hair. He was so terrifyingly handsome that beauty seemed to bead on his skin like fresh dew. When Shiori had first met him, his good looks had been so overwhelming she thought she might go blind.

“Clemens,” she said, “thank you for the other day.”

“I’m the one who should be thanking you,” he replied. “If we get the chance to work together again, I’ll be counting on you.”

“It would be my pleasure. Now, let’s see. One each of sliced char siu, yakitori-flavored chicken ham, dashimaki omelet, oyster and spinach sauté, braised eggplant nibitashi, and roasted vegetables in bagna càuda sauce. All together, that comes to one silver and two coppers.” In a whisper, Shiori added, “I put in an extra chicken ham.”

Seemingly delighted at the quiet words, a broad grin broke across Clemens’s face. He was normally a very gentlemanly person, but when he was happy, he smiled like a little boy. He paid for his food, told Shiori to hang in there, and took his leave.

Shiori was working diligently to deliver her orders when high-pitched cheers began to come from the line of people waiting. Apparently, Rurii was entertaining the customers. She had no idea where Rurii had learned to do it, but the slime was making oddly flirtatious poses as if trying to make the female customers die of cuteness.

“That kid is pretty good. Taking the time to teach it was worth every minute.”

“Nadia...” Shiori’s tone was both amused and exasperated as she turned to face the owner of the voice, a person she thought of like an older sister. At some point, the beautiful woman with bright strawberry blonde hair had taken up a position at a neighboring table. She smiled bewitchingly.

“Oh, what does it hurt?” said Nadia. “The slime is adorable. It should make use of that.”

As she spoke, she reached out with her long, beautifully slender fingers to pick up paper bags from the basket with her fingertips and pass them one after another to Shiori. It seemed she was going to help. Nadia counted the payments and shut them away in a tin box off to the side. With the two of them working in concert, the distribution of goods proceeded rapidly, and they were finished in less than half an hour. All that remained before them was an empty basket, a tin box full of money, and a stack of orders for next time.

“Thank you, big sister,” said Shiori. “I’ll add in one of your favorite portable foods for free next time.”

“Well, that’s a happy thing. In that case,” Nadia thought a moment and said, “those apple strawberry snacks I ate before, do you still have some around?”

“I do. I’ll give you some next time.”

“Thanks. I’ll be looking forward to it.” Nadia’s sensual lips curved into a smile.

With Nadia seeing her off, Shiori put the Guild behind her.

On her way home, Shiori stopped by a grocer’s to buy ingredients for next time. The shop brimmed with rows of fruits and vegetables, and a case that stood next to the counter where the proprietor sat was filled with chunks of meat, fish, and shellfish arranged in neat lines. A magic stone that emitted cold air kept the temperature in the case low, so there was no fear that any of the meats might go bad.

“Welcome,” said the man at the counter. “Oh! Well, if it isn’t young Miss Shiori.”

Shiori took a moment before replying. “It would take a person far more brazen than I to be called ‘young miss’ at my age.”

It seemed the facial features and physical characteristics particular to her Japanese heritage made her appear younger than her true age. The fact that she was shorter than the average height of people in this kingdom played a part as well. Still, as she considered herself to be a grown woman, she wasn’t

pleased with the way everyone saw her as younger.

“You look more than qualified to be a ‘young miss’ to me.”

Shiori cast a suspicious eye over the proprietor, Marius. She could see a few lines at the corners of his eyes, but she thought that maybe...

“Marius, how old are you?”

“Huh? I’m thirty-three next month.”

“Then we aren’t that far apart!”

The information took a moment to sink in. “Huh? What?! You’re kidding. I thought you were maybe twenty at most!”

“If I were twenty, I’d say I was twenty! Why would I lie to make myself older?” If she were of an age to want to pretend to be an adult, that would be one thing, but she couldn’t understand what the point of lying to make herself middle-aged would be. “Hmm, maybe next time I’ll go to the big store on the main street.”

“No, no, no! I’m sorry! I’m really sorry for treating you like a young girl! I’ll throw in some extras by way of apology, all right?”

Shiori’s day-to-day groceries, plus her once-a-week bulk purchases, added up to quite a sum. Losing a good customer who contributed so much to his sales would hurt.

“What can I get for you today?” asked Marius.

“Four blocks of pork shoulder, five chicken breasts, and,” Shiori paused a moment before continuing, “could you slice up a beef rib for me?”

“Sure thing,” said Marius. “Thanks for always buying so much. If you’ll wait, it’ll only take me a minute.”

While Marius got the meats ready, Shiori picked out other ingredients. Kabocha squash, onions, eggplant, soy beans, finely ground cornmeal, and apples all made their way into her basket.

“For tubers, the fall harvest’s about to come in, so all I’ve got left are old ones that have started sprouting,” said Marius. “If you want them, I’ll mark ’em down

and you can take the lot.”

“Thank you so much,” said Shiori.

“Tomato season’s almost over, so the quality is starting to drop off. What do you think? Want to take them too?”

“Well, I’m growing tomatoes at home,” Shiori thought a moment, then said, “but I do want a lot, so I’ll go ahead and take those.”

“Thanks for your business!” said Marius. “But growing food at home, huh? Storydia sure is nice. In Dolgast, it didn’t matter if the crop was for household consumption, the whole thing was taxed. How’re you supposed to live like that?”

Marius was formerly a citizen of the Empire. About ten years ago, he had fled the Empire with his family in tow. They’d come here ready to face death when round after round of heavy taxation had left them destitute.

In the Dolgast Empire, where belief in the superiority of the aristocracy was deeply rooted, anything and everything was taxed. The Imperial family and the titled nobility grew richer, while the common people suffered in poverty. In Storydia, anything made for household consumption was, of course, untaxed. But in Dolgast, everything from potted plants, to sprouts from seeds dropped by birds, to the seeds of inedible weeds—basically, anything that grew—was taxed. It was a perfect system of exploitation.

“People here probably wouldn’t believe it,” said Marius, “but in the town where I lived, if you dropped something in the street, it got taxed. They called it the lord of the land’s ‘luggage storage fee.’”

“That’s terrible...”

“There’s some really horrible stories about kids who fall down in the street. When no one can pay the storage fee, they take the kid instead. And the stories are true.”

Shiori had no words. She, herself, had no good memories of Imperial aristocrats. Her brow furrowed as she fell silent. Seeing this, Marius appeared to panic a little. He knew about the incident that had happened a year and a half ago.

“Hey, sorry for talking about all that,” he said. “It’s not really an apology, but, um, uh, here. Please take all of this!”

Having received a massive amount of meat scraps and trimmings, and leftover vegetables that hadn’t sold, Shiori and Rurii stood outside the shop staring at more packages than they could carry. Rurii had taken up half of it, but looked fairly squashed under the load. Technically, if Shiori tried hard, she’d be able to carry the rest, but several minutes’ walk with a set of stairs at the end of it would be rough. She had begun to consider the idea of asking the shop to look after the packages so that she could take multiple trips to carry them, when a voice called out to her.

“Looks like you bought a lot again. Shall I help?”

Shiori turned to find a tall, handsome man standing next to her. The dark magenta eyes that peeked out from under his chestnut brown hair were narrowed with amusement.

It took Shiori a moment to say, “Alec.”

2

That day, Alec had turned his steps toward the Guild with the thought of picking up an easy request. He hadn’t seen Shiori much as they’d been on different jobs and kept missing each other, but if luck was with him, he might get a glimpse of her. It was a faint hope, but he held it close as he pushed open the Guild door.

“Huh?”

Alec stepped through the door to find the atmosphere charged with a strange excitement. There weren’t many people in the hall, but Alec sensed from a lingering feel in the air that something had just happened. He glanced around the room and noticed that the people looking through job requests, the people chatting happily at the tables, and the people at the counter speaking with Guild staff were all carrying the same sort of paper bags.

“What’s going on?” He wondered if there was a shop nearby holding a special sale or something.

“What’s this? Why, if it isn’t Alec. It’s been a while. I heard you did some really good work the other day.”

The words, spoken in a sensual voice, made Alec turn and look. A bewitchingly beautiful woman stood there. She was clad in garments that were quite stingy in terms of fabric and generous in terms of exposed skin. They appeared almost apologetic in their attempts to conceal her magnificent bosom, which was on the verge of spilling out, and the exquisite line of her hips. Her lustrous strawberry blonde hair was tied high on her head, the lashes that framed her shining honey brown eyes were dusted with sparkling glitter, and her porcelain-pale skin looked impossibly soft and smooth. The alluring crimson of her lips seemed almost an invitation as they curved into a smile.

Alec’s eyes flew wide without him realizing it. “Nadia, you...”

“Yeah?”

He took a moment before saying, “You look like you’ve made yourself younger. What magic did you have to use to do that? You’re like a full-fledged witch now.”

Nadia’s smile retreated as she arched her elegant eyebrows. “I see you’re as sharp-tongued as ever.”

In his memories, this captivating witch looked older, with rough skin and damaged hair. She appeared quite a lot more youthful now.

“It’s all thanks to Shiori,” said Nadia. “She told me that I should improve my eating habits so that they aren’t centered around meat and tobacco. Giving up smoking was really hard. But doing that and eating vegetables as I was told have made me as you see me.” She gave her smooth skin a satisfied stroke.

Now that she mentioned it, Alec noticed that Nadia wasn’t holding the long, slender kiseru pipe that she normally carried in one hand like an extension of her body.

“Impressive,” said Alec. The idea that a change of diet and giving up smoking could make you look younger was deeply intriguing. However, hearing the name of the woman for whom he was currently trying to devise a method of wooing made his thoughts turn in her direction.

“She was just here, you know,” said Nadia. “If you’d arrived a little sooner, you might have been able to buy some of Shiori’s portable foods.”

“Portable foods? She’s doing things like that too?”

“It’s pretty popular every time she does it. After all, it makes it easy for people to eat her home cooking wherever they travel.”

When he asked, Alec was told that Shiori sold her wares once a week. That was a missed opportunity. If he’d known, he wouldn’t have idled away his time.

“She only just left,” said Nadia. “If you want her, why don’t you try chasing after her? You already know each other, right? She’s probably stopped by Marius’s place to do some shopping.”

“I see. Well, I’ll go have a look.” Alec said a quick goodbye and raced out. Seeing that, Nadia’s brows lifted in amusement.

Walking along the road, Alec spotted Shiori right away. She stood in front of a shop with a huge number of packages in hand. When he spotted Rurii there, half-squashed under a pile of parcels, he couldn’t help bursting into laughter.

He stepped closer and said, “Looks like you bought a lot again. Shall I help?”

“Alec.”

Alec took the bundles from Shiori’s arms without waiting for a reply. Rurii shook bouncily as if asking him to take the ones it was carrying too.

If it could carry a person, it shouldn’t have any trouble with this, thought Alec as he lifted the packages off of Rurii. The slime immediately sprang back into a beautiful bun-like shape and hopped up and down. It seemed the slime might be a bit of a crafty one.

“Should I carry these to your place?” asked Alec. “You’re in the apartments up ahead, right?” Having found an excellent pretext for entering Shiori’s home, Alec smiled inwardly.

Shiori fretted a bit, but after some thought, she bowed her head apologetically and said, “Yes, thank you.”

Walking together side by side, each carrying bags of groceries, they looked

just like a married couple. The thought made the corners of Alec's mouth twitch upward in a smile. Not bad at all.

After a little while, they arrived at an apartment building with dark ivory walls and a brick-red roof. The entrance was scrupulously cared for, kept clean, with not a speck of dirt on the polished banisters, and seasonal flowers adorned the counter beside the door. There, an older man wearing a crisply starched, pure white shirt and charcoal gray slacks looked up from some kind of ledger book, and gave them a small nod in greeting. He must have been the caretaker.

"Miss Shiori," he said. "The dashimaki omelets you gave me yesterday were delicious. My wife was delighted as well."

"I'm just glad you enjoyed them," said Shiori.

Amidst this casual exchange, the caretaker turned his eye toward Alec. But instead of treating Alec with suspicion, which would be a common response in this sort of situation, the caretaker gave him a gentle smile and nodded a greeting. It gave a sense of the goodness of his character.

They climbed the stairs and Shiori directed Alec to a corner room on the second floor. Upon opening the blue-gray door, a faint scent carrying traces of a bright sweetness tickled his nose—Shiori's scent.

"Thank you for carrying all of this for me," said Shiori. "Please have a seat. I'll bring out some tea."

"Sure. Thanks."

While Shiori readied tea and refreshments, Alec turned where he sat to look around the room. The whole place was neatly organized, and there wasn't much in the way of miscellaneous items or objects that served no practical purpose. But next to the bed, which was tucked into a corner, stood a shelf stuffed to bursting with books. The overflow from the shelf lay stacked on a small table nearby. Even from afar, Alec could see a number of little tags sticking out from the pages of the volumes which told him that Shiori was a studious person.

The kitchen where Shiori stood, portioning out baked sweets onto little plates while waiting for the water to boil, was filled with rows of airtight glass

containers. Some of them were probably for herself, but Alec thought that at least half must have been intended for the enjoyment of her party members while on expeditions.

After his very intriguing look around, Alec idly picked up the order forms that had been left on the table in front of him. He glanced at one or two, then his hands stilled as he spotted a familiar name.

Alec read the order form aloud. “Clemens Theydon. Yakitori-flavored chicken ham, thinly sliced braised pork char siu, anchovy and garlic dressed potato wedges, eggplant and bacon sautéed in garlic...” The combination of foods sounded delicious, but what he said was the first thought that had occurred to him.

“These all look like snacks for alcohol.” Not one of them would look out of place in a pub.

“You think so too?” asked Shiori, setting out cups of black tea and little plates of baked sweets. “That thought has been nagging at me for a while.”

The two of them turned to each other and laughed, feeling as though they’d caught a glimpse of an unexpected side of the gentlemanly dual sword wielder. After a moment, Alec took a sip of his tea. He could tell that she’d used good leaves. Shiori told him that she’d learned how to make tea from Nadia.

Incidentally, Rurii was amusing itself, playing in a washbasin filled with water.

“This is a curious assortment for portable foods, though,” said Alec. “Most of them seem like they wouldn’t keep well.” Leaving the meats and seafood aside, things like risottos and soups couldn’t be packed in oil or pickled in salt.

“Oh,” said Shiori, “that’s because...”

She set down her cup, went into the kitchen, and returned with a tray carrying a glass jar, a kettle, and a bowl. From the jar, she pulled out something square-ish wrapped in waxed paper and placed it in the bowl—it was a dry, reddish-brown, cube-shaped lump.

“What is that?” asked Alec. “Some kind of dried food?”

“Watch this,” said Shiori. She poured hot water over the lump in the bowl and

stirred it with a spoon.

As Alec looked on, it turned into a tomato-colored liquid and a delicious scent wafted upwards. “This is...”

In a mere moment, the nugget of dried food had transformed into a wonderfully fragrant soup. Alec’s eyes opened wide in astonishment. At Shiori’s encouragement, he brought a spoonful to his lips. The acidity of tomatoes and the aroma of smoked meat spread throughout his mouth. And there was a vibrant texture to the finely chopped vegetables that had been included in the little cube. For dried food that had simply been reconstituted, both the flavor and mouthfeel were very good. It was as though the soup were freshly made.

“It’s tomato soup,” said Alec. “But how did you...”

“The process is called freeze-drying,” said Shiori. “I use ice magic to rapidly freeze prepared foods, and then I use wind magic to dry them. It doesn’t damage the texture or the flavor, so it’s a useful method for preserving food.”

“Freeze-drying?”

“The results are light, so they’re easy to carry, and they reconstitute quickly with just hot water, so they’re perfect for field rations. And...” As Shiori spoke, she went to a cupboard and pulled out two boxes. They were of a size that she could carry both at once.

Alec could sense a flow of magical power coming from them. “Are those magical tools?”

“Yes,” replied Shiori. “I had them custom made for me. Though, with my means, this was as large as I could manage.” As she lifted the lids to show Alec, she explained that she would have liked larger ones so that she could make more at a time.

The boxes were made of high-quality metal that formed an airtight seal when closed. And it looked as though magic stones of wind and ice were built into them.

“I said it happens rapidly,” Shiori continued, “but both freezing and drying take a few hours each. With my magic levels, that’s difficult. I once tried to force it to happen more quickly, but my magic ran out in an instant and it was

quite a disaster. So I've ended up relying on magical tools instead."

Apparently, these freeze-dried foods were created by putting single-serving portions of prepared dishes into molds and placing them into the boxes. They were then frozen and dried, in that order. As Shiori could only make so many at a time, to cope with her limitations, she'd restricted her sales to once a week and also restricted the number of items a person could order.

"Still," said Alec, "this technology is very interesting. Did you come up with it yourself?"

"No," Shiori answered quietly. "It was something we had in my homeland."

Shiori's as-yet still-unidentified homeland. Her words were heavy and tinged with the faintest trace of longing. Alec thought that she probably didn't want to touch on the subject any further. An awkward silence fell over the room.

"Well," said Alec, changing topics to drive away the uncomfortable atmosphere, "I'd like to place an order. Would it be all right if I did that now?"

Shiori nodded, the loneliness fading from her expression. Relieved, Alec looked over the list of portable foods and filled in the necessary information on the order form.

That evening, when Alec returned to the boarding house where he'd been lodging for the time being, he set two glass jars atop the table in his room. He'd received them as thanks for carrying the groceries. One held portable foods and the other held something meant to be eaten as a side for some alcohol—chicken liver and potatoes packed in oil. They were, of course, all made by Shiori.

After the tea, Shiori had treated Alec to lunch, and they were so caught up in conversation that time had passed without their noticing it. He'd had the impression that she was a reserved sort of woman, so he was surprised to find that when he brought up a topic, she spoke amiably and laughed often. It might be easier to approach her than he'd thought.

That is, as long as he didn't make a mistake in judging how close they were.

He was getting old. In another few years, he'd be over forty. Since the age of

nine, for a full quarter of a century, he'd surrounded himself with chaos and turmoil. He'd suffered more than enough hardships. He was starting to want a calmer, more settled life in a place where he could just be himself. And, if possible, with someone gentle and healing by his side.

Alec mused aloud, "Maybe the one who's been looking for a place to belong is me." The unexpected thought made him smile wryly.

It wasn't a problem. It just meant that maybe he'd been drawn to this woman because he sensed she was like him, that she was searching for the same thing. If that were the case, then all they needed to do was to be that place for each other—to become a presence that provided such a space even as they sought it in one another.

Alec stripped off his gear, changed into comfortable clothes, and sat in a humble, unadorned chair. He gulped down some ale he'd stocked up on previously, then reached for one of the jars. Upon opening it and pouring the contents into a bowl from his equipment stash, a faint aroma of herbs rose into the air. He speared a piece with a fork and brought it to his mouth. There wasn't any of the unpleasant gaminess that was usually associated with organ meat. For a moment, he enjoyed the savoriness that could only come from meat and the perfect level of saltiness that danced over his tongue, then swallowed it down.

In it, he tasted a hint of what he'd been seeking for so long—a taste of home.

Chapter 3: Making a Visit to Comfort the Orphans

1

The religious district of the regional capital, Tris, lies off the main road which leads to the lord's mansion and affiliated government offices. Shiori walked down a cobblestone street lined with souvenir shops and various lodgings for pilgrims and clergy, with welfare facilities such as free medical clinics and almshouses scattered among them. Pilgrims dressed in white and travelers with talismans hanging from their necks came and went, making the whole place look bustling and prosperous.

At the end of the broad street lay a plaza with well-tended flowerbeds, blooming profusely with seasonal blossoms and dotted with sculptures of deities and holy persons. Shiori passed through it to arrive at Tris Cathedral, the pride of the capital. Its chalk white spire looked beautiful against the clear, blue sky.

Shiori walked down the side of the cathedral, past the many worshipers going in and coming out, toward the facility that stood in a grove at the back. The two-story, red brick building looked like it could be a school, and it had once functioned as quarters for the reverends who served there. Now, it was Tris Orphanage, a children's home established by the cathedral where orphans and children who couldn't stay with their families due to certain circumstances lived.

The temple knight standing in front of the gates saluted with a good-natured smile. Shiori returned the gesture with a slight bow as the knight opened the entrance for her. The gate and fence were not meant to keep anyone locked up. They were for protection, and for the prevention of crime. Still, there were stories that occasionally some of the older children would jump the fence and go into town for fun.

As soon as Shiori stepped onto the grounds, children came rushing out,

shouting with joy. Perhaps they'd heard the sound of the gates opening. The children were clean, as were their clothes, and their complexions were good. They seemed very well cared for.

The wife of the margrave was extremely passionate about matters of child welfare, having suffered hardships as a child herself, and made generous donations to the facility. It looked like those contributions were being used correctly to benefit the children. Compared to other orphanages, this one was incredibly blessed. And yet, no matter what they did, they always lacked the types of culture and entertainment that enriched minds and hearts. The margrave's wife was concerned about this and Shiori's visit was in response to a standing request she had made—she wanted people to do things that would make the children happy.

They could tell stories of their own adventures, or give weapons demonstrations in their specialty. The difficulty level of the request was C, and while anyone D-rank or above could take it on, the rewards weren't particularly good when compared to other quests. Plus, no one wanted to give a poor showing and disappoint the children. It made the performers feel bad. Just thinking up something to present gave people a hard time. All of which was why not many adventurers took the job on and the guild master was generally forced to appoint someone who wasn't otherwise engaged.

It was, however, possible for the children to request someone specifically. Clemens's dual sword demonstrations and silver-tongued Linus's adventure stories were popular, but this time, they'd asked for Shiori.

"It's big sis Shiori!"

"Yay, it's Miss Shiori today!"

Most of the children who had come flying out seemed genuinely happy, but some of the older boys pouted, appearing dissatisfied.

"Man, it's the witch lady and not a swordsman?"

"Stop that, Toby!" A middle-aged man dressed in the robes of his order came out and scolded the boy.

Toby stuck his tongue out at him. There hadn't been any malice in his words.

He'd probably just been hiding his shyness.

"Honestly." The reverend turned away from the boy. "I'm so sorry, Miss Shiori."

"Not at all," said Shiori. "I don't mind. It's natural for boys to admire knights and swordsmen."

The Reverend Jens looked deeply apologetic. "He talks that way, but he's actually looking forward to your 'narrated pictures.' As am I, of course. It's amazing that you thought to use illusion magic in that manner."

"It makes me happy to hear you say that." Shiori cast her gaze toward Toby. "Well then, in answer to Toby's wish, I think today I'll tell a story about knights."

The boy's sullen look suddenly brightened. Such a blatant display of self-interest made Shiori burst into laughter.

The children took her hands and led her into the orphanage's hall. At Jens's prompting, Shiori took the stage, and the children took up places wherever they liked. The space in the center where Rurii sat was incredibly popular. All the pushing and jostling had distorted Rurii's shape, but Rurii itself didn't seem upset about it.

Seeing that the children had settled, Shiori began her story.

"Today," she said, "I will tell you the story of the Persikka Knight, a tale of long, long ago."

Here on the continent, "persikka" was a word that meant "peach." This story was about a hero with a connection to the fruit—the Japanese folktale "Momotaro" retold in a Storydian style.

Shiori activated her illusion magic and projected the narrative into the air. This was her original illusion magic, "narrated pictures." The whole hall fell suddenly and completely silent.

"Once upon a time, in a certain kingdom, at the foot of a mountain, lived a young, hardworking married couple. They did not have any children. Every day, they prayed to the goddesses, 'Please may we have a child.'"

The space blurred softly and a beautiful scene bursting with greenery appeared—a small village at the foot of a mountain. As peaceful music played quietly, the scene changed, showing the lovely village overflowing with blooming flowers, and a small hut where the young couple lived. Every night, the two looked to the stars and prayed.

“Their desperate wishes were heard, and one night a beautiful goddess appeared before them. ‘Eat a persikka fruit from the top of the mountain,’ she said, ‘and I shall grant you my blessing.’”

Against a backdrop of solemn music and beautiful moonlight, a vision of a glorious goddess appeared. Her skin was like white porcelain. The light of the moon shone through her pale golden hair. Clad in sheer, light pink silk that glowed with a mysterious rainbow iridescence, the goddess extended her hand toward the children.

The girls exclaimed and sighed with joy. Beautiful goddesses and lovely princesses were what these young maidens admired.

“The couple followed the goddess’s words and climbed the mountain where they found a persikka tree illuminated by the moonlight. The tree bore but a single, large persikka fruit. The two shared it and ate it together. Before long, an adorable, round little baby boy was born to them.” Shiori changed the scene to show the interior of the humble hut where the married couple smiled down at the baby in their arms. His fluffy blond hair carried hints of pink and his eyes were a dark magenta.

“He’s so cute!” The girls raised their voices in excitement once more.

Shiori breathed a sigh of relief. Jens had assured her that she didn’t need to think too deeply about it, but she had been worried about telling stories of children with loving parents to a group of orphans. They might have some thoughts about it, but the children all seemed engrossed in the tale.

“The boy who had been born through the blessing of the goddess was given the name Perleric. He grew very quickly and soon, he had become a strong, gallant knight.” Shiori projected an image of a beautiful young man, a knight with a calm, inspiring gaze and a firm set to his lips. He wore the uniform of the knights—white with gold embellishment along the hems—and carried a

sword with an elaborate design on the pommel. The knight knelt before the throne.

This time, it was the boys who shouted with excitement. The brave knight was the object of adoration of every boy there. Even Toby's eyes sparkled as he gazed at the illusion with rapt attention.

"And then, one day, the princess was kidnapped by a fearsome demon king," Shiori continued. "Perleric's resolve was firm. 'I shall rescue the princess,' he said."

The scene changed to show a sinister man dressed in black, with a silver-haired maiden wearing a pale peach dress held trapped in his arms. She reached out a hand as if asking for help.

The girls screamed, clutching at each other, while the boys clenched their teeth and glared at the demon king as if they'd become knights themselves. They'd all completely entered the world of the story. Finding them adorable, Shiori smiled.

"As Perleric readied to leave on his journey, his father gave him a necklace with a talisman carved from a branch of a persikka tree, and his mother gave him wine that had been infused with persikka fruit. 'The persikka have received the blessings of the goddess,' she said. 'I am sure they will protect you. Come home safely, Perleric.'"

The monarch of the kingdom and Perleric's parents saw the knight off. Music that was sad, yet somehow heroic, played in the background. Three young men appeared before the knight: a sandy-haired swordsman, an iridescent-haired mage, and a chestnut-haired martial artist.

"In his travels, Perleric met three heroes—the swordsman Hundt, a mage called Fogel, and the martial artist Arpa. The four of them exchanged cups of persikka fruit wine and vowed to topple the demon king together."

Having gained three companions, the knight continued his journey, defeating demons along the way. Before long, under a sky blanketed with ominous, dark clouds, they arrived at the demon king's castle. Amidst chilling music, the four men confronted the demon king.

In a flash, the music changed to a dignified, heroic, up-tempo song. Shiori did not add unnecessary narration here. This was the climax and she showed it through illusions and music alone. The mage set loose his magic. The martial artist unleashed his greatest techniques. The knight and the swordsman crossed blades with the demon king.

The children cheered passionately for the heroes. For some reason, even Jens's fists were clenched tightly as he leaned forward to watch Shiori's projections of illusion magic. The sight nearly made Shiori laugh aloud.

In the face of the fierce onslaught of the heroes who had received the goddess's divine protection, the demon king steadily weakened and was pushed backward. The knight held his trusty sword before him at the ready, pointed toward his opponent. He rushed in and dealt the demon king a finishing blow. The heroes shouted with victory, and they and the princess all embraced each other.

The heroes and princess made their triumphant return down the main street amidst the fluttering of confetti and flower petals. The three brave men became knights of the realm, and the young man who had been a knight married the princess and was given the throne—a beautiful young king with his queen nestled tightly by his side.

“And that is how Perleric and his companions defeated the demon king together and safely rescued the princess. After they returned to the kingdom, Perleric and the princess married, and together they lived happily ever after.” Shiori concluded the story with a happy ending and quietly released her illusion magic. All that remained was a lingering memory in the air.

The girls' spellbound eyes were moist with tears, and the boys' cheeks were flushed with the excitement of the heroic tale. After a moment, thunderous applause resounded through the hall.

“That was awesome! So cool!”

“It was lovely! The princess was so pretty!”

The children, overcome with emotion, mobbed Shiori. Rurii bounced around excitedly alongside them. The narrated pictures illusion magic had been a huge success. For someone with very little magic power, keeping both visual and

audio illusions activated simultaneously while telling a story was intensely draining. But it made Shiori happy to see the children's sparkling, shining smiles.

"Thank you so much, Miss Shiori," said Jens. "It was wonderful this time as well. I admit I got quite caught up in it."

"I'm just glad everyone enjoyed it. It makes the effort feel worthwhile."

Jens's cheerful expression clouded over just a little. He lowered his voice. "Once you've passed the gate, please drink this. You pushed yourself a little too hard, I think. Your complexion doesn't look good." So saying, he passed her a palm-sized, light-shielded bottle. It was a vial of magic energy recovery medicine.

"We received it amongst our donations," said Jens, "but we have no need of it here, you see. So, please, don't worry and use it."

After a brief hesitation, Shiori said, "I will."

With her ready acceptance of the vial, Jens's expression cleared. Really, resting would be best, but if she did, the children would worry. Shiori didn't want to do anything that might dampen their mood when they'd all had such a good time. Jens had probably passed her the magic energy recovery medicine because he understood that.

"Well," said Jens, "Miss Shiori has to leave now. Everyone come say goodbye."

"What? Already?"

"But I want to hear more stories!"

The children complained, but with some gentle chiding from Jens, they all followed his directions.

"Thank you so much, big sis Shiori."

"Come tell us more stories someday."

"If it's about heroes, I wouldn't mind giving it a listen." This last line, with all its posturing, was Toby's. Apparently, once he was old enough to leave the orphanage, he planned to make a living as an adventurer. Shiori was certain that he'd choose to take the path of a swordsman.

“I’ll see if I can ask for a swordsman to come next time.” Shiori’s words made Toby break into a happy grin.

“Oh,” Shiori moaned softly, “I guess I am a bit tired after all.”

It had only been a little over ten minutes, but activating and maintaining both visual and auditory illusions for that length of time had been difficult. Seeing the children’s delight had made Shiori so happy, she’d gone beyond the limits of her magic power.

The temple knight at the gate was concerned and encouraged her to rest in the guardroom, but Shiori politely declined. Once she’d passed through the gate and had reached a place where she could no longer see the children, she reached for the medicine bottle. She drank it down in one gulp and the magic power she’d lost returned. As she breathed a sigh of relief, Rurii tapped the ground at her feet.

“I’m all right,” she said. “I won’t push myself too hard. I just overdid it a little today, that’s all. How could I not when everyone was so absorbed in the show?”

After hearing her words, Rurii flattened out on the spot, almost as if it were saying, “Get on.”

“No,” said Shiori. “I’m grateful, but I couldn’t possibly. Not in the middle of town.”

When Rurii had carried her before, she’d been all but unconscious. Shiori had accepted a ride in town just once, but a group of amused children had piled on and squashed Rurii. Shiori had felt so bad, she hadn’t accepted a ride since then.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Thank you.”

Even with her magical power recovered, the fatigue remained, but it wasn’t so bad that she couldn’t walk. Shiori created some water with her water magic to prove that she was all right, and Rurii drank it up like it was a treat. Rurii gave one jelly-like shake, then leaned forward as if it were bowing. Apparently, it had accepted her reassurances.

Shiori smiled broadly at the expressive slime, then looked down at her hands.

Her magic power had recovered.

She hesitated. *Just for a moment.*

Every time she used illusion magic, a hunger rose inside her. She knew it was futile, that nothing could be done, but if it was just looking, just for a moment...

Shiori called up a palm-sized illusion. Rows of buildings hid the earth and sky, and paved roads wove between them. There was a tumult of people coming and going, a bustling of cars. And, unlike here, the air and sky were just a little bit dirty.

This was a place she could see only in memory, only in illusions—her homeland. It hadn't been all good things there, but she had memories of growing up, and of people she had smiled and laughed with. Without a doubt, it was where she had been born, the place she had come from.

It had only been four years, but in that time she had been so desperate to survive that she'd completely integrated herself into this world. Her new memories steadily overwrote her old ones, making them dim and fade. Every time she projected this scene, the edges grew a little more blurred.

But even so... The reason she couldn't help but remember must have been because that place was her homeland. Without realizing it, Shiori began to hum a song she recalled from time to time. It reminded her of a place she still couldn't forget, a place that traveled through her heart over and over in her dreams—her old home.

Kreee. The door opened with a creak of hinges that filled the room. Thinking it was high time to oil the thing, Zack looked up from the ledger he'd been writing in. It looked like Shiori and Rurii were back after completing their job. Shiori handed him the request ticket with her mage hat pulled down low over her eyes.

"Good work." Zack checked the familiar signature in the "request completed" field, and passed Shiori the pouch that held her reward. "You should go home and rest for today. We can finalize things and measure your experience levels next time."

“What?” asked Shiori. “But it’s only just past noon. I—”

Zack reached out and gently brushed a tear from Shiori’s eye with his fingertip.

“Idiot,” Zack drawled. “You’re saying you can work with your face like that? I know how hard you push yourself. No one’s going to complain if you take an early day once in a while.”

He patted her cheek the way one might a small child’s, then quietly encouraged her, “Rest up and come back tomorrow, ready to go.”

Shiori hesitated a moment, then said, “All right. Thanks, big brother.”

She left without a fuss. But while her lips were curved into a smile, under the hat she’d pulled down over her head, she’d been crying.

I’m still the only one allowed to see her tears, thought Zack. It was his prerogative as her big brother, a privilege he’d gained when he had taken her in as a sister so that she wouldn’t face as many problems due to her uncertain social status. He had no intention of letting other men see those tears so easily. But if, one day, there were an honest man he truly felt he could entrust his sister to, that would be different.

Alec’s determined gaze flashed across Zack’s mind.

2

Amidst a silence so profound as to be frightening, two men faced each other. They assessed one another with piercing gazes. The tips of their weapons were completely still.

The chestnut-haired man held a magic sword charged with powerful magical energy at the ready. Imbued with power, the magnificent blade had no nicks or chips in it. And though it did not carry a signature, anyone who saw it could tell that it had been made by a master craftsman.

The silver-haired man opposite him held dual swords of gleaming black-iron. The raven dark blades, polished to the point that they looked like they might cut with just a touch, showed reflections of the two men facing off.

Chit chit chit. A little bird took flight in the trees, breaking the silence. The men burst into action. With gliding, effortless motions, they closed the distance between them in an instant. A heavy, metallic sound rang out as their swords clashed and violent sparks flew. They attacked and defended, then struck again, exchanging blows. Springing back, they each paused, assessing, but their glares lasted for only an instant before they charged forward once more with lightning speed. The chestnut-haired man brought his magic sword down sharply from above, but the silver-haired man deflected it with his dual swords, in a fluid motion that flowed into a slash so elegant it looked like a dance.

The wordless, fiercely fought clash of swords continued for a few minutes and then the two pulled away from each other with a heavy rasping of metal. For a fleeting moment, their eyes met—dark magenta and greenish blue. They rushed at each other, closing the distance between them. And in a flash, the bout was decided. The point of the magic sword stopped just beside the neck of the silver-haired man and the tips of the dual blades pointed at the chestnut-haired man's throat.

For a moment, all was silent. Then the hush was broken by the high-pitched cheers of children, and applause thundered through the space.

"You old guys are so cool!"

"Swordsmen are awesome!"

While the children shouted their praises all at once, Alec and Clemens broke their stances and looked at each other. At exactly the same moment, they grinned. It seemed that the children had found the martial arts demonstration with real swords to their liking.

"When she asked, I wasn't sure what to expect," said Alec, "but this wasn't bad."

"Right?"

Clemens had apparently given solo demonstrations a few times, but Alec had never done anything like a sympathy visit to an orphanage before, so he'd been bewildered in the beginning. Still, as it was Shiori who had asked, he couldn't help but nod his agreement.

“I promised a boy at the orphanage that next time there’d be a swordsman,” she’d said, “and you two are the only ones I can ask right now.”

When she’d bowed her head and begged a favor, there was no way Alec could say no. She’d said that if just one of them would go, that would be enough, but Clemens had suggested that they could spar instead, since they had the opportunity. Alec had taken him up on the idea and that had led to the demonstration they’d just given.

Alec and Clemens sheathed their weapons, and the children came rushing over.

Seeing their excitement, the reverend warned the children before anything could happen. “Now, don’t touch their equipment without asking. It’s disrespectful.”

“Mister swordsman, what kinds of magical beasts have you defeated?”

“Tell us about your adventures next!”

The younger children simply pleaded for stories of their adventures, but the older ones had more pragmatic questions—like how to join the Guild, what might be on the tests, and how to train. It looked as though they were thinking very seriously about what they would do once they came of age. Alec and Clemens listened attentively and answered as much as they could.

“Say...” Even as the word left his mouth, the boy speaking it seemed reluctant. He’d been listening to Alec and Clemens particularly attentively. Alec was pretty sure the young man’s name was Toby.

“Um...so is big sis Shiori not coming back?” His words were blunt and off-handed, but his flushed face failed to hide his feelings. Alec’s eyebrows twitched upwards in a childish reaction, but Clemens broke out into a cheerful laugh.

“What, so you’re after Shiori too, are you?” he asked.

A shocked moment passed. “‘Too’?” asked Alec and Toby in unison.

“A lot of men have set their sights on her,” said Clemens. “Unless you put in quite a lot of effort, it’s going to be hard for you to stand in the same ring as

them.”

“Ugh, are you serious?”

“If you pass the tests and the aptitude assessment, you’ll be a Guild colleague,” continued Clemens. “Once you increase your rank, you’ll probably end up on jobs with her. All you have to do is work hard.”

Toby, who hadn’t even come of age yet, wasn’t so much a step behind as he was several laps behind. Alec wondered if he even knew how great the age gap between them was. Toby groaned, and Clemens laughed and patted him on the back.

Before long, it was time, and despite the children’s best efforts, Alec and Clemens put the orphanage behind them. After walking a while in silence, and after only the slightest bit of hesitation, Alec asked about something that had been nagging at him from their exchange with Toby.

“Are there really that many men with their sights on Shiori?”

“Yes, there are,” said Clemens. “The way the gentle, homey side of her contrasts with her strength of heart that won’t be broken by adversity is very attractive, of course, but that fleeting fragility she shows from time to time stirs quite a lot of men to want to protect her.”

Alec sensed something in Clemens’s words. “You too?”

Clemens gave a pained smile at having it pointed out.

“Yes, well,” he said. “I do want to protect her, but...” He sighed bitterly, cutting off his own words. “Ever since the Akatsuki incident, the number of men who have tried to openly court her has declined. It would be like taking advantage of the wounds in her heart. It feels cowardly.”

Alec paused, then said, “I see.”

Now that he thought about it, he remembered that there had been men in the party in question. And with full knowledge of the fact that her life was at risk, those men had left Shiori behind in a labyrinth. How could she not be hurt?

“But then, it has been over a year since it happened,” said Clemens. “And the

number of new faces at the Guild has increased, so men might start approaching Shiori again soon. Still, since Zack's keeping a watchful eye on her, your average guy probably isn't going to be able to get close."

Alec laughed. That was certainly true. He'd seen exactly that the other day when he'd declared his intent to make Shiori his own and, as a result, had been hit with more bloodlust than he'd ever encountered on a battlefield.

For Zack to unleash such fury...that's how bad that incident had been.

Her companions had used her until she broke and then discarded her. If Rurii hadn't been there, that wonderful woman's life would have come to an end in some dark place that no one would ever have found. Just the thought of it made Alec feel as though icy water had been poured over his heart. Now that he had met Shiori, he never wanted to consider the possibility that he might not have had the chance to do so.

I don't know what kind of people this Akatsuki lot are, but if I ever get the chance to meet them...they're not getting away for free.

Without his noticing, Alec's hand went to the pommel of his sword and gripped it tightly.

Chapter 4: Undertaking a Search for Lost Children

1

With their visit to the orphanage completed, Alec and Clemens passed through the cathedral plaza and walked down the cobblestone street that led to and from the sacred site. The voices of the barkers for the souvenir shops and eateries overflowed with a merry liveliness, and the faces of the pilgrims and travelers walking along the road were serene and bright. Children ran past Alec from behind, laughing innocently.

Only a single mountain range separates them, thought Alec, but this place is so unlike the Empire. It really is peaceful here.

Even when compared with its neighbors, the Kingdom of Storydia was an untroubled country with no conspicuous conflicts or skirmishes. Roughly twenty years prior, there had been a clash over the royal right of succession, but the illegitimately born prince had renounced his right to the throne at an early stage. As a result, everything had been resolved quickly and without a single drop of blood being shed.

The king, who had ascended the throne at a young age, was a good ruler who put his people first through the use of outstanding diplomatic skills and superior political strength. The people themselves were relatively mild-mannered and flexible in nature. And though the winters could be brutally cold, and even the summers were cool, the influence of warm air currents created a climate that was temperate for the high altitude. This meant that agriculture flourished, making the kingdom an abundant one.

It was a good country to live in, completely unlike the Empire where the privileged class ran rampant, squeezing the people to extort meager crops harvested in the harsh cold. As Alec thought back on his travels to their neighboring country upon undertaking a request from a certain “valued customer,” he savored the tranquil air of Tris.

“Huh? Is that...”

Hearing Clemens’s murmured words lifted Alec out of the thoughts that he’d been immersed in. Still walking side by side, Alec followed Clemens’s line of sight and spotted a familiar black-haired woman and a stone blue lump. Rurii was playing with some children as Shiori spoke with a street stall owner.

“Looks like they’re on their way back after a job too,” said Alec.

Since she was unsuited for combat, Shiori often undertook requests in town and in the surrounding areas. Adventurers tended to turn their attention to tasks like suppression raids or the exploration of ruins or labyrinths, but Shiori never balked at taking on requests that others called plain or boring. It allowed her to stay connected to the people of the town. And perhaps because of her efforts, her relationship with them was a good one. Though Alec felt that, really, it was in large part due to Shiori’s character and personality.

“Shiori!”

Shiori turned at the sound of Alec’s voice. When she spotted them, she quickly bid the shop owner farewell, and hurried over.

“You’re both working so hard,” she said. “Are you on your way back from visiting the orphanage?”

Unlike the people here in the northwestern part of the continent, who favored big, obvious expressions of emotion, Shiori’s smile was as gentle as a tranquil sea. It was a smile that was unique to her.

“We are,” said Alec. “Did you just come back from a job too?”

“Yes, I just finished delivering the medicinal herbs I’d been sent to gather.” She smiled, saying that she had fun on gathering quests because they offered her the opportunity to learn a lot.

Alec and Clemens returned her smile with polite, slightly conflicted smiles of their own. Shiori had an insatiable appetite for the acquisition of knowledge. The mountains of books Alec had seen in her rooms the other day had told him as much. At first, he’d simply admired her for being studious, but ever since he’d heard from Zack that she absorbed every scrap of information she could so that she could better adapt herself to this country, it all seemed terribly

heartbreaking to him.

“Please, make sure to be careful when you leave the town,” said Clemens. “You always seem to push yourself too hard. I worry.”

As soon as Clemens had finished his gentle warning, the area around them suddenly filled with noise. They could hear the whinnying of horses and the beat of their hooves. A team of mounted knights raced down the main road, heading for the West Gate. Mixed in with the knights were a number of well-dressed men. One among them turned his gaze to Alec and the others. Having already passed them, he pulled his horse to a stop and returned.

“From your appearance, you would seem to be adventurers! If you are not currently engaged, we would ask your aid!” The young man, who looked to be an attendant of a noble house from his clothes, spoke without attempting to hide his agitation. His expression was pale and tense.

Before there was any chance to ask what was going on, a man who was probably the young man’s companion returned and interrupted in a gruff tone.

“What are you doing, Elias? This is no time to amuse yourself with idle chatter!”

“A squad of knights alone does not reassure me! Adventurers excel at working in the wilds. They may be quicker in their search!”

They began to quarrel, leaving Alec and the others with no better understanding of the situation. The three exchanged a look, then Alec took the lead and cut into their argument.

“Hey, what is all this about?” he asked. “We don’t know the situation.”

“Our young master and an apprentice valet have gone missing in the western woods,” said Elias. “We have exerted every effort in our search, but we simply haven’t been able to find them. Having determined that the task is an impossible one for laymen like us, we have commissioned a squad of knights with the search.”

As children, their curiosity had likely led them into the forest. They had been on an outing, and when Elias had looked away for the briefest of moments, the noble boy and his young valet had disappeared. Elias’s words broke and halted.

The other man picked up the thread.

“Both of them are lightly dressed,” he said. “We must find them by sunset, or...”

Uneasy murmurs rose from the crowd of onlookers that had sprung up around them without their noticing. With autumn deepening, it was warm enough during the day to dress lightly, but at night, temperatures dropped far below ten degrees Celsius. It was more than cold enough to freeze to death. But, even before that, if they happened upon magical beasts... The magical beasts in the western woods might be small, but if the children were attacked, they wouldn't stand a chance.

“I beg of you!” said Elias. “Please, lend us your aid!”

The sunlight had already begun to slant, and the sky was starting to take on the faintest traces of red. Hearing the desperation in the man's entreaty, Alec and Clemens exchanged a look and nodded.

“Shiori,” said Alec, “go back for us and tell Zack we got an emergency request. We'll take care of this.”

Shiori hesitated, then said, “I may be able to help. I can search for them using magic.”

A look of joy rose on Elias's and his companion's haggard faces upon hearing Shiori's words.

“That would be such a help!” said Elias. “We are racing against time. Please come with us.”

“Yes, um, wait a— Oh!”

They were in such a panic that, without waiting for an answer, the man accompanying Elias jumped off his horse, picked up Shiori, and lifted her onto Elias's steed. Elias held her tightly from behind and took up his reins. Together, he and the other man rode off with single-minded determination. Left behind, Rurii bounced furiously up and down in a fit of rage.

“Hey, wait!” Alec called after them. “Blast!” He'd never imagined that they'd take only Shiori. He clicked his tongue in frustration without realizing it. No

matter how capable Shiori might be, tossing her, a low-level mage, into an unknown situation surrounded by nobles and a squad of knights wasn't something Alec was prepared to accept. Clemens seemed to be of the same mind.

"Alec!" he cried. "The western woods are just outside the gate! Run!"

"Got it!"

The two broke into a run, racing toward the forest that lay outside the western gate. Rurii jumped up and grabbed hold of Alec's waist. The slime clambered nimbly up to Alec's shoulders where it clung tightly. Alec felt the increase of weight, but he paid it no mind and kept running.

2

About three hundred meters outside Tris's western gate lies a sprawling forest. So close to the capital, the magical beasts which inhabit it are small, and on days when the weather is nice, the area attracts a lot of people from the region for holiday outings and the like.

Now, on the outskirts of that forest, knights walked around busily in an atmosphere charged with tension. Men and women in well-tailored street clothes look on anxiously, watching with bated breath. They appear to be the attendants of the missing boy. All the others who had come out on excursions had been sent home so as not to interfere with the search.

Alec arrived at the edge of the forest out of breath. The man who had been with Elias noticed him and walked over.

"You came to help us."

"Where is she?" Alec asked after Shiori's whereabouts without acknowledging the other man's words.

The man, who gave his name as Martin, gestured to an area behind him with a jerk of his chin. He urged Alec to follow him.

"You can't just carry people off like that," said Alec.

"My apologies. We wanted to ascertain their location if we could. I hope you

understand.” After another moment, he said, “She’s over there.”

At the mouth of the forest, Shiori stood in front of a small footpath. She was accompanied by Elias and a man who was probably the commander of the knights. They were deep in conversation, but when Shiori saw Alec approaching, a look of relief crossed her face. Rurii jumped down from Alec’s shoulders and leapt at her.

After a moment, she said, “I’m so glad you came.”

“The way you were suddenly carried off like that had me panicking.” Alec put a hand on her shoulder.

“Me too.” Shiori’s smile was both strained and apologetic.

“Is this really going to work out, though? You said you’d search using magic, but how?”

By its nature, the scope of search magic was exceedingly narrow. You could, for example, search for a tool imbued with magic within a room. It had very limited applications. To put it another way, that was the only level at which you could make use of it. At most, you would be able to find a misplaced magical tool. Alec had never heard of it being used for anything like looking for someone who’d gotten lost or stranded.

“Miss Shiori, if we could get started?” Elias broke into their conversation. His anxiety was clear in his expression. There were about two hours until nightfall. They were running out of time.

“I’m sorry, yes,” said Shiori. “I’ll begin. If everyone could keep quiet for a moment, it would be a very great help.” She stood at the edge of the forest, her arms hanging by her sides, and turned both palms toward the trees. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. A sensation, as if the air had stretched tight with a snap, prickled their skin.

“This is...” Alec watched Shiori for a few moments searchingly, and then he read the flow of magical power. When he guessed the true form of the magic she was executing, a small groan escaped him.

“What’s happening?” whispered Clemens. Not being very well versed in magic, he turned his gaze to Alec as if seeking an explanation.

Alec paused before answering. “It’s an application of search magic. She’s stretching her magical power as thinly as possible and releasing it toward the forest. That’s probably to conserve the small amount of power she has. And she isn’t sending her energy out uniformly. She’s using a mesh pattern with an eye to further economize on power. With this method, she’ll definitely be able to cover a wide area with search magic.”

Search magic was the process of releasing magical power and detecting the reaction it has when it catches on other magical energy. Every human possesses minute amounts of magical power. Shiori was likely trying to determine the lost children’s location by finding those slight traces.

While everyone, without exception, has magical power, the answer to the question “Does having a faint trace of magical power mean you can use magic?” is “No.” In general, when people say they “have magical power,” what they mean is that they have enough magical power to use magic. With that definition, Shiori only barely qualified for the designation, but she was now using her minute level of magical power to search for reactions from even fainter traces of energy than what she possessed.

But, even given all that... Though her magic levels might be low, she was using what she had to the absolute fullest extent and coming up with ingenious adaptations in her magic. Alec’s eyes half closed as he looked fondly at Shiori’s delicate figure from behind.

What does she mean, “housekeeping mage”? thought Alec. She isn’t simply a housekeeper. She’s a splendid mage in her own right.

Clemens frowned slightly. “But that... Won’t that put a considerable strain on Shiori?”

“Probably,” said Alec. “She’s casting her magical power over a wide area and holding it there. It must demand a lot of concentration.”

It was a feat that only Shiori, with a dexterity that allowed her to easily master combined magics, could accomplish. But using this search magic over a large area wouldn’t just expend magical power—it would also require tremendous force of will. There was no way she wasn’t feeling the strain.

Alec unconsciously reached for the pouch at his waist. He had magic energy

recovery medicine in reserve. Shiori probably carried some with her as well. But it wouldn't go so far as to replenish mental or physical strength. Only rest could do that.

"Alec," said Clemens, keeping his gaze on Shiori. "In the Akatsuki incident, Shiori pushed herself to her limits and learned to hide the fact that she was doing so. It won't show in her expression. The only way to tell if she isn't feeling well is by looking at the color in her face. Remember that."

"Got it." As Alec answered, Shiori reacted to something.

She pointed in the direction of ten o'clock. "There are two responses that seem human in that direction, and multiple presences drawing closer to them! The distance is a guess based on the feel, but I'd say it's about five hundred meters!"

Voices rose in a tumult from the knights, and everyone from the noble house gasped. Following orders from the commander, the knights rushed off in the direction Shiori had indicated.

"Miss Shiori, please come with us to more precisely ascertain their location!"

"Hey! Stop!" Alec protested when he saw Elias take Shiori by the hand. "This magic consumes power at a furious rate. Don't push her so hard! There shouldn't be any problem leaving this to the knights now, right?"

As he spoke, he looked at Shiori. Her face did seem pale. And if he looked very closely, he could see from the movement of her shoulders that she was breathing hard. Those were the symptoms of magical exhaustion—the condition of someone's magical power running dry. He wasn't about to let someone make her run through the forest with its poor footing, or to use any more magic than she already had.

"This is no time for such carefree words! What if the worst should happen to our young master?"

"I understand your concern for your lord," Alec snapped, "but people are not expendable tools created for the use of the nobility!"

Elias gasped and fell silent in the face of Alec's vehement protest. When Alec noticed how wide Shiori and Clemens's eyes had grown, it brought him back to

himself.

“Alec, I’m all right,” said Shiori. “I’ll recover with some rest, but if anything happens to the children, there isn’t any coming back from that. And I believe I have a good grasp of my limits. I won’t collapse or do anything else as unsightly as that. I can go.”

Shiori wasn’t just gentle and kind. She pierced him with a gaze that held great strength. Her eyes were those of an adventurer. And as an adventurer, she had her pride. Alec opened his mouth to speak, then gave up and sighed instead. He realized that if he were in her place, he would probably be saying the same thing.

“All right,” said Alec. “In that case, drink this first.” He pressed the magic energy recovery medicine into her hand. It could only recover her magical power, but it was far better than nothing at all.

Once Alec had made sure that she’d opened the medicine bottle immediately and drunk it all down as she’d been told, he exchanged a look with Clemens. The other man didn’t seem happy, but perhaps he’d given up as well. Clemens nodded.

“Shiori,” said Alec, “I’ll carry you. Come on.”

“What?” Shiori showed only a moment of bewilderment before she nodded her understanding. “Right!”

The speed with which she understood things and made decisions was definitely that of a mid-ranking adventurer. She must have decided to entrust Alec with determining the best course of action in the situation.

Alec slipped his arms around Shiori’s back and behind her knees and pulled her close, lifting her. He and Clemens nodded to one another and they raced into the forest.

They turned off the path and pushed their way through the bushes, running in the direction Shiori had pointed. The forest was as bright as the sunlight filtering through the canopy allowed, but the towering trees and the thick underbrush meant that the footing was poor, and it could in no way be

considered an easy place to run. That said, for adventurers it was an unremarkable, familiar environment.

Held in Alec's arms, Shiori deployed her search magic, working diligently so as not to lose sight of the target of their rescue. The powers of concentration she possessed, to keep a cool head even in this emergency situation and maintain control of her magic, were truly something to behold.

"The subjects have moved!" shouted Shiori. "They seem to be being chased by something! Their position has shifted from the earlier direction!"

Elias and Martin showed signs of their anxiety as they trailed Alec and the others. The two laymen were falling farther and farther back. Alec decided to leave them behind. They may have dabbled in self-defense, but their skills didn't amount to much more than that. Even if he brought them along, they wouldn't be of any help.

"The knights have started to drift off the course they need to be on!" said Shiori.

"Which way to those in need of rescue?"

"That way." Shiori pointed in a direction just slightly off of where she'd first indicated, toward eleven o'clock.

Alec adjusted course as he ran. In the distance, at the furthest reaches of his vision, he spotted the figures of the knights who had gone in ahead of them.

"Hey, the children are in that direction! The subjects have begun to move!" Clemens shouted to the knights, who took note and changed direction to align with where Shiori was pointing.

Then, in that moment, they heard a scream. If they hadn't known the situation, the shrillness would have made them think it was a woman, but they knew it must be one of the boys they were there to rescue. The scream had come from the direction in which Shiori had pointed. It proved that her searching ability had not been mistaken.

The source of the scream was much closer to Alec and the others than to the knights. They picked up their pace and hurried in the direction the cry had come from. From right beside Alec came the sound of scraping metal—Clemens

drawing his twin swords from their sheaths.

“I’ll go on ahead.” Clemens lowered his stance even further and accelerated, leaving them behind.

“Shall I get down?” asked Shiori, perhaps feeling guilty about the fact that they weren’t putting on speed.

“We’re almost there,” said Alec. “Considering the time it would take to put you down, continuing like this is faster.”

Alec could sense a number of presences up ahead. The sound of slashing attacks accompanied grating death cries. It seemed Clemens had already engaged in battle. Glimpses of silver hair appeared and disappeared between the trees along with a mass of black, wriggling...

“So it’s giant spiders, huh?” remarked Alec.

A swarm of giant spiders, each large enough to make an armful and sickeningly striped in black and yellow, blanketed the ground, making it seem to writhe and wriggle. Beyond them, near the base of a large tree, crouched a boy with his foot caught in a white, thread-like substance. A well-dressed boy stood in front, protecting him, with a short sword held at the ready. In that moment, a number of giant spiders sprang at them from the gaps in the branches overhead.

“Tree Leaf Concealment!”

As the boy spoke the spell spun of unfamiliar words, the fallen leaves around the two sprang up in a wild, whirling dance as if protecting them. The strong wind that mixed with the dried leaves sent the giant spiders flying, unable to pounce upon their prey. A few among them slammed against the trees with considerable force and fell to the ground.

“He’s pretty good,” said Alec, “attacking while using a barrier of wind as a defense.”

Shiori jumped out of his arms. Now more light of foot, Alec held his magic sword at the ready and drew even with Clemens. He began to hear men’s voices and the slashing of swords from behind him. The knights appeared to have caught up.

“There sure are a lot of them,” said Alec. “You think they’ve been breeding?”

“Looks that way.”

As the forest was so close to the capital, the knights were supposed to perform regular inspections and magical beast exterminations, but it could have been that some had slipped through the cracks. Insect-type magical beasts multiplied quickly, so if even a few escaped, they’d easily swarm again. The boys had probably just been unlucky in stepping into the spiders’ territory.

A portion of the number before them looked as though they had switched their targets to the knights, but the rest began to steadily close the distance between themselves, the boys, and the three adventurers.

Alec wanted to hit the whole lot of spiders in one blast of fire magic, but the fact that they were in the middle of a forest, of course, gave him pause. It might be damp in the shade, but if he used enough fire magic to burn a swarm this size, the forest would undoubtedly catch fire. That said, if they rushed in without thinking, he could easily see things turning bad—like, for example, if they got caught in those sticky threads.

A single giant spider would be relatively easy for even a novice adventurer to defeat, but a huge swarm that covered everything around was a different story. The dangerous thing about insect-type magical beasts was the fact that they attacked in groups. If you didn’t have something like a wide-range attack skill at hand, exterminating them would prove difficult. And sometimes they carried a strong paralytic venom. If they took your ability to move by biting and injecting you with venom, there’d be nothing left you could do. A surprisingly large number of adventurers lost their lives by letting their guards down around low-level magical beasts.

At any rate, the first thing that needed to happen was protecting the boys. The distance between them and Alec was roughly ten meters. It was a short distance, but the swarm of giant spiders made it hard to get close.

Alec cloaked his magic sword in fire magic which was effective against both giant spiders and spider silk. He was careful not to ignite the surrounding area as he slashed at the giant spiders before him. With one sweeping swing, he slew several of the beasts at once. In contrast, Clemens deftly manipulated the dual

swords he held, weaving his way through the swarm and making mince of the giant spiders that closed in from either side. Shiori followed behind Alec, maintaining the perfect distance between them so as not to get in the way. The strong wind that blew against the nape of her neck at intervals seemed to be something she had created herself. She used it to chase away the giant spiders' threads.

When they reached the boys, the adventurers turned their backs toward them to provide cover and face the giant spiders.

"Fall back and get as close to the tree as you can," said Alec. "Once you've done that, stay there and don't move. Got it?" He spoke without taking his eyes off the spiders. Then he heard a quiet "Got it" from behind him and the sounds of someone moving.

Alec was glad that the children listened well. There were some who insisted on pleading or giving orders in this sort of situation, making it harder to safeguard them, and an especially high number of them seemed to be of the nobility.

Shiori took up a position in front of the boys to protect them as they retreated. Alec had noticed it during the manticore suppression, and he was seeing it again here—her actions as a rear guard left absolutely no room for criticism. She protected herself so as not to hinder her companions. She assessed the situation and provided exactly the right amount of support to the vanguard. If something was pointed out, she understood immediately and took action. And while she didn't have much magical power, she found ingenious ways to utilize what she had to the fullest. Whether it was in camp or on the battlefield, she used her skills to help her companions. It was no wonder she'd made B-rank in just three years.



Perhaps realizing what was going on, Rurii circled around behind the two boys. It seemed the slime was going to cover the rear. Any giant spiders that cut in from behind fell prey to Rurii. The slime was showing its true abilities.

Alec glanced toward the other side of the battlefield. Through strenuous effort, the knights were gradually reducing the swarm, but the sheer size of it made the fight a hard one. Some of the knights had collapsed to the ground, taken out by paralytic venom or spider silk.

“Well then,” said Alec, “how will we reduce these numbers?”

The reason they hadn’t had any major casualties in spite of the spiders multiplying to this extent was likely because they had only just hatched. All of them looked smaller than what Alec knew of giant spiders. But the fact that they had just come from their eggs meant that they were frantic for their first meals in the outside world.

“Maybe I’ll just go all out and burn them to cinders with fire magic, then throw water magic at everything.”

“Please stop kidding around,” said Clemens, parrying Alec’s rough mutterings with a quip. “I’d rather not commit a lovers’ suicide by fire with the giant spiders, thank you.”

“I have an idea.” Shiori’s voice came from behind them. “I don’t know if it will work, but if you could buy me a little time...”

“What’s your plan?” asked Alec.

“I’m going to suffocate them. If they’re just big and their body structure is the same as a regular spider, then I think I can do it.”

Alec exchanged a sideways glance with Clemens. “What do you think?”

“I’d never considered it before,” said Clemens, “but they probably don’t differ from normal spiders other than being huge.”

At any rate, as long as they were somewhere that could easily ignite, wide-range fire magic was ruled out. All Alec could do was physically crush them with his magic sword, making sure that no sparks flew from the fire that cloaked it. Shredding them with wind magic would work too, but it wasn’t as certain a

method as fire.

Alec made up his mind. "All right. Give it a try."

"Yes, right away." Shiori pulled some kind of white lump from her shoulder bag.

Alec asked, "Soap?"

"Yes, I had just bought some more in town. It worked out perfectly."

Alec had thought he'd gotten used to the novel and striking way she did things on their quest the other day, but he had absolutely no idea what she was planning to do here.

Spider thread came flying at them and the swarm of giant spiders attacked.

Alec mowed them down with his magic sword and shouted, "Do what you want! We'll leave it to you!"

"Understood!"

As Alec and Clemens wielded their swords, they could feel magical power rising behind them. The scent of soap tickled their noses. And then...

"Bubbling Water Current!"

With the speaking of the spell, a flow of water appeared and soaked the swarm of giant spiders. The scent of soap rose into the air and bubbles flew. The spray was gentle, not enough to push the spiders back, and yet the beasts took heavy damage. The giant spiders that had been so relentless in their wriggling and crawling all suddenly came to a stop. Then, one by one, they fell flat on their backs, stomachs exposed. And after a few convulsions, they ceased moving completely.

"What...?" Alec was lost for words. He couldn't understand what had just happened. Clemens was the same. He simply stood there with his eyes wide and his mouth half-open. Alec pierced the body of one of the unmoving giant spiders with the tip of his sword. It was unmistakably dead.

"What could have...?" Alec looked around and saw that all of the knights had frozen in their tracks with their swords still at the ready. Then, the knights noticed a group of survivors closing in on them and adjusted their stances.

“Bubbling Water Current!”

Another stream of foaming water spread across the ground before the knights had a chance to swing their swords. One after another, the giant spiders fell, convulsed, and expired. When they spotted a few of the beasts escaping, the knights came back to themselves and defeated them.

“Clean up, complete.” In a dazed voice, the man who seemed to be the knights’ commander declared the battle over. The other knights looked bewildered as they exchanged glances, then gazed down at the giant spiders which had become no more than carcasses.

“Oh, I’m so glad. It worked.”

Shiori’s voice brought Alec back to the moment. He turned to look at her. She appeared proud of her achievement. Certainly, the results had been magnificent, but it had been a spell of terrifying power. That huge swarm had been taken out with just two shots. What could it have been? As he opened his mouth to ask for an explanation, he heard a moan from behind him.

“Franc! Hang on!” The blond boy called out desperately, but the red-headed boy who’d been caught in the spider silk only lay there with knitted brows, moaning in pain. His fingers had stiffened and frozen in distorted shapes.

“Looks like he got hit with venom,” said Alec.

“Medic!” Some of the knights had spotted the boys and called for a field medic.

“Move aside,” said Alec.

The blond boy looked up at the adults with pleading eyes. He quietly moved away from the one he’d called “Franc,” and clenched both his hands into fists. He was a child who couldn’t be much more than ten, but he already had the pride of a noble. It was easy to see from the way he so desperately strove to maintain his composure. Shiori knelt gently beside him.

“It’s all right,” she said. “We can neutralize the venom. Are you injured anywhere?”

“I’m fine, but...” The boy looked up at Shiori, about to say something, but

then he swallowed those words and asked, “What about you? Are you all right? You’re very pale.”

Alec looked up at the boy’s words. It was hard to tell in the shade, but she had lost a lot of color. Once he’d administered Franc an antidote and performed some emergency field treatments, he entrusted the boy to the knights’ medic, who had rushed over. Then Alec moved over to Shiori.

Her face was pale and her breathing was shallow. They were signs that her magic power had run dry again. Though, regardless of whether she’d done a lot of magic or not, her reserves always seemed to be quickly depleted.

Her spells were not bound by convention—they were creative and original, and they absolutely delivered results. She made full use of them, but her low levels of magical power were a fatal flaw. If she had even an average amount, she could have worked on the front lines as much as she liked. In fact, she might even have been one of the great mages—

Alec forced his thoughts to stop there. He was sure that Shiori must feel it more keenly than anyone else. It wouldn’t do anyone any good for him to fret over it here.

“It’s only magical exhaustion,” said Shiori, standing. “It isn’t a problem.”

And it was true that she appeared steady, her feet planted firmly on the ground. She didn’t show any weakness in her carriage or demeanor. And yet...

“The only way to tell if she isn’t feeling well is by looking at the color in her face.” Clemens’s words flitted through Alec’s mind. The fact that it showed in her complexion meant that she was actually really struggling. It was only that she didn’t show it in her expression.

“Adventurers, we have finished treating the wounded.” A knight called out to them as he picked up Franc, who was too weak to stand. “We will move them to the medical corps’s tent for now, but I wonder, what are your plans? If it causes no inconvenience, I would take your statements before we return to town.”

Apparently, the knight needed to make a report to his superiors. Alec’s gaze traveled as he pondered, and met Clemens’s where he stood behind the knight.

Clemens's eyes turned toward Shiori. It looked like he and Alec were once again thinking the same thing.

"If it's all right, we'd like to rest in your tent for a while," said Alec. "You can hear our statements there."

"Understood," said the knight. "Thank you for your cooperation."

It was already dusk. Inspection of the site would commence early the next morning. The knights began pulling out. One of them went to pick up the blond boy, but was firmly refused. The boy stood up very straight and walked beside the knight carrying Franc. Alec and the others were told that the blond one was the young master they'd been looking for.

Though he was a child, he carried himself like a member of the nobility, and the way he worried for his valet touched the hearts of everyone who saw it. He was a good master. He hadn't abandoned his servant. In fact, he'd stood and protected him from the magical beasts. The way he'd looked in those moments had been truly noble.

After watching the knights, Alec turned to look at Shiori. Her eyes were hollow as she gazed at the boys. Alec quickly realized that she must be remembering the incident. Maybe she was seeing herself, who had been abandoned back then, overlaid on top of the scene before her.

A child had put his own life on the line to protect his injured companion. But those who had been her companions at the time had simply abandoned her.

"Shiori, we're heading out too."

She didn't stir. She just kept looking at the boys. Alec scooped her up in his arms.

"Oh! What are you doing?" Shiori shouted in surprise and the life came back to her eyes.

She was back to being herself again. Alec felt deeply relieved.

"I can walk!" she said.

"You think I'm going to let a woman whose face is that terribly pale walk?" asked Alec. "Settle down."

“But...”

“Shiori. We won’t leave you behind.”

Shiori’s breath caught at Alec’s words.

It had left a scar, just as Alec had thought. Her experiences that day may have planted a sense of dread within her, the thought that if she proved to be even the slightest hindrance, she’d be cast aside. That’s why she pushed herself so hard, and why she hid it.

“Don’t push yourself. When you need help, you can turn to us,” said Alec. “That’s what companions do.”

The people who had left her behind that day were not her companions or her friends. That’s all it was. But Alec knew that these few words alone likely wouldn’t heal the wounds inflicted on the tenderest parts of her heart.

Shiori stayed silent, but the tension drained from her body and she entrusted her weight to him. She still seemed dissatisfied, but she appeared ready to allow herself to be carried.

“Come on, Rurii, let’s go,” said Alec. Once he’d seen that Rurii had slipped away from the dead giant spiders it had been rummaging through and joined them, Alec started walking, following the knights.

The glimpses of sky they caught through the gaps in the trees had already turned a warm madder red. Beyond the forest, a number of lights flickered. The knights waiting on standby outside the wooded area must have lit magic lanterns.

Soon the curtain of night would descend.

Shiori must have been tired after all, because on their way back, her head began to bob and she dozed off. Looking down at her, with her face nestled against his shoulder, Alec felt that she had started to let her guard down a little around him.

When they reached the tent the search party had put up, they saw Elias and Martin come running toward them. Once it had been determined that they

would only serve as hindrances, the knights had quickly pulled them out and brought them back here.

“My Lord Klaas!” Elias went to the blond boy—Klaas—and knelt before him. “I am so glad...so glad you are safe.” All the strained stiffness in his manner crumpled.

The boy spoke. “I’m sorry. I have caused you...no, I have caused all of you a great deal of trouble.” Seeing the state of the attendant, who was older than him, and the many knights seemed to have made Klaas realize the gravity of what he had done. “Franc ended up injured because of me too.”

The moment he said Franc’s name, Elias’s expression became stern. He looked around and spotted the knight still holding the limp Franc in his arms nearby. Elias sprang at him, grabbing at Franc. Those nearby hurried to hold him back.

“Stop it, Elias!” shouted Klaas. “It isn’t Franc’s fault!”

“For one who serves to fail to protect, and not only that, but to actually expose your lordship to danger is simply—”

“I was the one who asked him to do it!”

“Even so, he should have advised against it! Advising our masters is one of our duties as those who serve!”

“Then what about you?” asked Klaas. “Would you have been able to do that as a young apprentice? Would you have been able to speak your opinion to a master to whom you’d only recently been assigned?”

In the face of the young lord’s sound reasoning, the attendant—a young man himself—fell silent.

Everyone around them exchanged glances, unsure as to whether they should intervene in this sudden quarrel between master and attendant.

“I am entirely to blame for these events,” said Klaas. “Franc tried many times to stop me. But I wanted...I just wanted more than anything to play with Franc the way other children play.”

Those last whispered words that dropped from Klaas’s lips rendered Elias

finally speechless.

It felt like the right moment. Alec stepped in to help. After all, if things continued like this, they'd never make it back to town.

"Why don't we leave it there?" he said. "It looks like the young lord sincerely repents his actions. Arguing further would only embarrass your master."

Hearing that, Elias snapped back to himself. He looked around and saw that they were surrounded by knights and others from the search party. His face flushed when he realized that everyone was watching them.

Klaas stepped forward, drew himself up tall, and fixed his eyes on the adults before him.

"I have caused all of you a great deal of trouble," he said. "I did not realize that my selfish actions would cause a disturbance of this scale. Through this, I have learned how significant an impact my own careless, imprudent behavior can have. It was truly inexcusable and I offer my sincerest apologies."

His apology was gallant and pure. As the young lord bowed from the waist in a show of remorse, the adventurers and knights smiled and exchanged glances. Elias hesitantly put his arms around Klaas's shoulders. Martin stood quietly behind them. The other attendants rushed over, carrying the still-hazy Franc with them. The knights scattered to their posts to deal with the aftermath and clean up.

"We caused quite a lot of trouble for you too," Martin spoke to Alec and the others.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it," said Alec. "We're just glad it didn't turn into a serious incident."

"I am thankful to hear you say that," said Martin. "But is Miss Shiori all right?" He looked at her anxiously.

A little of her color had come back, but her face was still pale. She breathed shallowly in her sleep.

"It's simple magical exhaustion. She'll be fine after she rests," said Alec. "It seems she pushed herself much too hard, though."

Martin hesitated before saying, “I’m sorry we carried her off like that. When I think about it more carefully, since we were talking with all three of you, we should have brought all of you together. No matter how panicked we may have been, for us to as good as kidnap a lady we had only just met... We must have lost all reason.”

He laughed derisively at himself, then continued, “And this incident...if you go to the very beginning, it’s our fault as well.” Martin turned to look at Klaas and Franc.

“He took up his title when he was only eight years old. His predecessor passed away at an early age. Lord Klaas is so very young, but he has been frantically working to fulfill his duties. That’s why we strive to serve him with all our hearts, in line with his wishes, but...” Martin paused. “I am constantly by his side. I should have noticed. Even as young as he is, he executes his duties so masterfully that I’d forgotten, but the truth is that he’s still of an age to want to play. I should have paid better attention to that side of him.”

Since he’d taken up his position as head of the house, the children of his own age that he’d been close to had kept their distance. In their places, as he carried out his duties, he was surrounded by adults whose ages differed from his own by more than double his own years. After being assigned a valet near his own age, and going on an outing to relax, Martin thought that he had probably been unable to suppress his innocent, childlike desires.

“I just wanted more than anything to play the way other children play.” That had been that noble young boy’s inner self speaking out.

“Then it’s a good thing you found out and took care of things while they were still at the level of childish mischief,” said Alec. “Everyone’s learned a lot from this—both him and all of you.”

“That’s true.” Martin laughed. “To be a good retainer I must tread even closer to my master’s heart, it seems. Well then...” Seeing a knight approaching, Martin closed the subject.

“Adventurers, I would like to take your statements now, if it isn’t any trouble. That is...I would like her statement.” The young knight spoke somewhat reticently.

Shiori was still asleep. Alec would have liked to let her rest a little longer, but it couldn't be helped. After exchanging a nod with Clemens, they followed the knights' lead to the medical corps's tent.

Inside, Franc was receiving further treatment and Klaas was being given a medical examination just in case. When Alec lay Shiori down on a simple camp bed that stood empty off to one side, her eyes opened.

"Oh, I..."

"He has some questions for us," said Alec. "Sorry, but you'll have to wake up."

Shiori looked around blearily, then in an instant her face went red and she sat straight up.

"I'm so sorry, I...I must have fallen asleep along the way," she said.

Alec laughed. "Don't worry about it. After all, it was pretty much through your actions alone that this thing got wrapped up. This can hardly be called trouble at all."

Abashed, Shiori shrunk into herself. Rurii crept up into her lap. The flash of surprise in the knight's demeanor at the appearance of the slime made Clemens and Alec burst into laughter. They each sat on one end of the simple camp bed.

"Well then," said the knight. "I will begin taking your statements. Though really, to put it simply, I'll be asking questions about what happened on site. What we most want to know about is the magic that was used to eradicate the giant spiders."

That's right. That magic. It had wiped out that huge swarm of giant spiders in just two shots. It was magic far beyond what a low-level mage should have been able to use.

"From what I saw of the way those giant spiders died, I feel...well, you must have used a very dangerous magical technique..."

Shiori's eyes went wide at the knight's words. "It was just soapy water."

In unison, the three men exclaimed, "What?!"

Clemens, Alec, and the knight's stupefied voices all overlapped beautifully.

Alec had known that Shiori had taken out some soap back there, but... “Soapy water?”

“That’s right, soapy water.”

Everyone exchanged glances. To think it hadn’t been some forbidden art, merely soapy water...

“Insects suffocate in soapy water,” explained Shiori. “An insect’s respiratory organs are covered in oils and fine hairs that repel water so that even if they’re submerged, they won’t asphyxiate. But soapy water works its way through the oil, so instead of getting repelled, it enters their respiratory system and suffocates them. That’s why I used magic to crush some soap and tried mixing it with water magic. I knew they were giant insects, but I wasn’t sure if it would work on them. I’m so glad it did.”

“I see,” said the knight, slowly.

“The soap should break down and go back to nature eventually, so I don’t believe it’s dangerous, but a large quantity may damage the environment as other harmless insects will get caught up in it. I think it’s probably best if it isn’t used too frequently, but when there’s no other choice, I feel it’s an effective method. After all, it’s very easy to do. You only need to use magic to mix fine soap shavings with water.”

Alec hesitated. “R-Right.”

After another pause, the knight added, “Th-That’s very helpful.”

The truth had been so far removed from their expectations that it left them feeling drained. In short, she had washed the place. Alec supposed you could say she was living up to her title of housekeeping mage.

As bewildered as the knight appeared, he recorded what Shiori had said in his notebook with what seemed to be great interest. The information might prove useful in the extermination of insect-type magical beasts.

After they’d learned the true nature of the magic Shiori had used, the knight finished taking their statements with some simple questions, as he’d said he would in the beginning. With that done, as the three adventurers breathed a sigh of relief, a medic called out to them.

“Is this the lady who requires medical attention?”

“What?” Shiori’s surprise showed on her face as a medic and a military physician came up to them. “But there’s nothing wrong with me.”

“Oh? Count Enqvist said that I absolutely must examine you. He feared that the paleness of your complexion might mean that you were injured.” The military physician looked off to one side.

Alec followed his line of sight to Klaas and Elias. Apparently, this Count Enqvist he spoke of was Klaas. When the young head of the House of Enqvist and his attendant met Alec’s and the others’ eyes, they both—particularly the attendant—looked abashed.

Elias hesitated a moment before speaking. “After forcing her to accompany us, I very nearly threw a rear guard, without any escort, into the midst of those magical beasts. My knowledge of battle is very limited, you see, so I—”

“Enough excuses! We must apologize properly!” Klaas’s rebuke cut through Elias’s fumbling words. “I cannot express my regret enough. I’ve been told that you were made to repeatedly use very draining magic for my sake. That in addition to being as good as kidnapped...” The young nobleman continued, apologizing not just for the uproar caused by his own actions, but also for subjecting a lady, adventurer though she might have been, to such danger.

“Please don’t trouble yourself over it any more. I’m the one who said I would help, so some of the responsibility in this lies with me as well. These are simply the symptoms of magical exhaustion. If I rest, I’ll get better.”

After hearing Shiori’s words, Elias whispered a small, “I’m so sorry.”

Clemens spoke up. “While we may all be adventurers, there are people like herbalist physicians and physickers—noncombatants that are more like scholars—among the rear guard. Naturally, they can’t fight on their own, so it causes problems when people think of them in the same way as vanguards. We’d be grateful if you kept that point in mind.”

Elias and Martin shrank into themselves at Clemens’s frank words.

“That’s true. We have trouble with that kind of thing too.” The medic, who had refrained from speaking earlier, gave a slightly bitter smile. “They do train

us in self-defense, but in the end, we're a medical unit. We can't fight the way the combat units can, but a lot of people seem to have trouble understanding the difference. Our uniforms are designed so that our roles can be differentiated on sight, but civilians still think that, whether we're medics or combatants, a knight is a knight."

"I must admit that I have been taken aback when approached on the street and asked to intercede in a physical confrontation." The military physician added his agreement.

Seeing how small with shame the boy and his attendants had grown at their words, the others exchanged glances and wry smiles.

"Well, that's how it is. Just bear it in mind if you plan to use adventurers in the future." Alec brought the conversation to a close, and the uproar over the missing children reached a more or less satisfactory resolution.

Unable to resist their impassioned insistence, Alec, Clemens, and Shiori found themselves riding back to town in one of the House of Enqvist's carriages. They were released at the end of the road that the Guild stood on.

As they stepped out of the coach, Klaas gave each of them a firm handshake and words of appreciation. "I am truly grateful for your help in this matter. I guarantee that you will receive a letter of thanks and your retaining fee very soon."

Elias and the others on horseback nodded their farewells, and the carriage slipped away down the streets. As the curtain of night had already fallen, they had probably given up on the idea of returning to the manor before the day was over. It was likely that they were headed to a lodging house in the finest district.

"Shiori." Alec turned to her. "You should go home and rest. We'll make the report to the Guild."

Shiori opened her mouth as if to say something, but didn't speak a word. Instead, she smiled apologetically. It looked like she might just do as Alec had suggested without protesting.

"I'm sorry, and thank you for letting me leave before you. You've worked very

hard today.” Shiori bowed, then she and Rurii headed home.

As they watched her walk away, Clemens whispered, “Are you sure about this? You wanted to walk her home, didn’t you?”

“We have to report to the Guild. And she seemed really tired, so making her wait around wouldn’t be good.” Alec gave him a strained smile. “But you noticed that, did you?”

“After seeing the way you were today, it’d be hard not to. Though it was surprising to me that you have feelings for Shiori.”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“It’s not wrong, it’s just unexpected. Even when women try to court you, you’re always so cold. You just ignore them. Seeing you so passionate about her, how could I not be surprised?”

“I’m not interested in the kind of female who would go out of her way to chase after me. But Shiori is a good woman. Her presence gives me comfort, and she makes me want to do the same for her. That’s the kind of person she is.”

“That’s true. She’s exactly as you say.” Clemens smiled his agreement. His hands gently gripped the hilts of his dual blades and his gaze fell to his feet. “We’re probably partly to blame for the way Shiori so stubbornly hides what state she’s in.”

The whispered words that dropped from Clemens’s lips were filled with self-recrimination. Alec silently urged him to continue.

“Ever since that incident, we’ve all started treating her as though she’s about to shatter. And because Shiori’s the way she is, it’s likely that she feels bad about us being so careful for her sake. That’s why she so obstinately refuses to take any hand extended to her with an offer of help, and insists that she’s fine.” Clemens looked toward the street corner where Shiori had disappeared from sight.

“She was told she was a burden and abandoned. Then, after making it back, she’s treated as though she’s going to break. With her personality, of course it would trouble her. In truth, what we probably should have done is to try to get

closer to her, even if we needed to be a little forceful about it. That's what seeing you with her today made me think."

Clemens struck Alec's shoulder with one hand. "She may have been reluctant, but she's taken your hand. Just now, she did as you told her without any fuss. That's because you've faced her head-on."

His blue eyes narrowed gently and the smile that lifted the corners of his mouth was tinged with regret. "Unfortunately, it seems I've failed in that."

Clemens walked away under the warm orange light of the magic lanterns that illuminated the street.

"Clemens..." Alec tried to say something, but couldn't think of a single word, so he held his tongue. With a short sigh, he started to walk, chasing after Clemens.

3

Zack confronted the Dark One. It had been said that the S-rank adventurer was unbeatable, that there was no one anywhere who was his match, but now, his eyes held a hint of fear. The hand that held his weapon trembled.

The trespasser gleamed darkly. It had brazenly made its way into Zack's private room, a place of rest and repose. It stirred with a quiet shuffling sound as its long feelers swayed erratically.

"Eeeah!" An unseemly shriek slipped from Zack's mouth, but as he was the only one there, he could scream and shudder with fear as much as he liked and no one would criticize him. Though, at the same time, that meant there was no one there to save him either. And that was why he had to face off against the Dark One all alone.

The thing wasn't supposed to be able to reproduce in cool climates. But it seemed a few individual creatures had slipped onto transport ships coming up from warmer countries and had adapted to colder areas, which allowed for breeding.

Zack, who was deathly afraid of them, was struggling in this confrontation. One of the greatest traumas of his life was when one of them had suddenly

showed up in his room and, in a half-crazed state, he'd used his favorite sword to split it clean in two. Then, on the verge of tears, he'd watched the still-living torso of the thing walk off, leaving him to deal with cleaning its sticky bodily fluids off of his blade. Even the time he'd been caught by the feeler of a carrion crawler—a giant hairless caterpillar—and nearly been eaten as a novice adventurer didn't come close to the shock he'd felt back then.

It was lucky that there were no giant magical beast versions of the Dark One like there were with giant spiders or giant centipedes. If something like that ever appeared before him, Zack was certain he'd die at the sight of it.

How did other people deal with these repulsive creatures? He'd once asked his companions about it. Alec had said, offhandedly, "You can just ignore them. It's not like you have to do anything." Clemens had avoided making eye contact and muttered, "I just chase them out of the room," which was an exceedingly passive method of dealing with them. Nadia had said something completely unhelpful like, "You turn them into smoldering charcoal with fire magic." And his adorable little sister had given the most terrifying advice with a perfectly serene expression: "I think the most effective method is to use a soft piece of paper and pick them up from above."

And so, frantically chasing the Dark One, smashing it with a rolled-up newspaper, and cleaning up the aftermath with teary eyes had become his standard procedure.

But the other day, he'd happened to hear of an extremely effective method of dealing with this kind of thing, and now he was attempting to put it into practice. In his dominant hand, he held at the ready a vessel fitted with a fine sprayer and filled with soapy water. It was a simple weapon, easily obtained, but it was powerful. With enough of it, a huge swarm of giant spiders could be killed in little more than ten seconds.

Show me the might of this most powerful of weapons!

Tension flooded into the hand that held the sprayer. The Dark One, which had been scuttling around, suddenly stopped.

Now!

Zack didn't miss the moment. Quickly, he pulled the lever of the sprayer. With

a light, clean scent, a mist of soapy water blew onto the Dark One. Its legs thrashed as though it were struggling. Covered in bubbles, it ran, trying to escape. But its usual quick and agile movements gradually slowed. Wanting it to stop, Zack sprayed it again and without a single shudder, the Dark One breathed its last.

“Amazing.” The word that slipped quietly from Zack’s lips was nearly a moan.

It definitely worked. The effect was tremendous. It really had taken care of the thing in only a few seconds. Just as he was thinking that he’d turn to this method for help from now on, Zack gasped, noticing something.

There before him lay the dead Dark One, drenched in soapy water.

No matter how quickly the battle had been settled, it made no difference in dealing with the aftermath. Zack stood frozen for a moment with the shock of this realization. Crestfallen, he dropped to his knees.

Shiori’s words flashed across his mind. *“I think the most effective method is to use a soft piece of paper and pick them up from above.”*

“That girl really is amazing...”

He wondered, if they lived together, would she take on all exterminations of the Dark One for him?

The day that Zack half-seriously began to think of living with his little sister for the purposes of pest control was in the autumn of his fortieth year.

Chapter 5: I Will Not Serve as Your Opponent in a Quarrel

1

“Oh. Sheila, that man is here.” Mia spoke in a lightly teasing manner.

Sheila looked over her shoulder to see a tall man with chestnut brown hair approaching. He looked around the room. Once he’d spotted an incredibly beautiful silver-haired man and a strawberry blonde he seemed to be friendly with, he walked over to them.

He’s so handsome, thought Sheila. She sighed, and Mia and Vivi poked at her, grinning.

When she’d first seen him, she’d thought that he gave off a bit of an unapproachable feeling. He was tall, with an impressive physique and a piercing gaze. At a glance, he was a little plain, but his silky chestnut hair and the strength in his dark magenta eyes were striking. A closer look revealed that he had beautiful features. And the way his face, usually so stern, broke into a smile around the people he was close to made her heart skip a beat.

He was a magic swordsman, just as she herself was, and he was passionate in his work. There was never a crack in his deportment or slip in his manner. No matter what job he took on, he always achieved good results. His skills as a magic swordsman were remarkable. Apparently, he’d been approached about being promoted to S-rank, but he kept refusing because he didn’t want his choice of job requests to be limited. Sheila found that to be just a little bit impressive. He was a man with unshakable faith in himself. When she was just starting out, Ludger had been her instructor and he hadn’t been bad, but this man was infinitely more wonderful.

She’d started watching him for no reason in particular, and before she knew it, she’d fallen in love with him.

But a meddlesome senior adventurer had told her, “It’s better if you don’t try approaching him yourself. He doesn’t like that kind of thing.”

Was that really true, though? Surely it had only been that the methods of those who had approached him were no good. That, or perhaps they hadn’t any charms. Maybe they’d failed because they had courted him too openly. All she needed to do was ask him to help teach her some basics. At least, that’s what she’d thought.

“Sorry, ask someone else. If all you want is someone to help you practice, then it doesn’t need to be me.”

He’d flatly dismissed her, and his words had been colored with quite a bit of revulsion. She’d been left adrift. After that, she’d run into him several times, but he showed no reaction at all. His attitude made it seem like he’d completely forgotten that she’d tried to court him, forgotten even her face. He really had no interest whatsoever in her. And yet...

When Sheila saw that black-haired woman walk in, she clicked her tongue without noticing.

“Hey, it looks like that woman is with Alec and the others again.”

“Her name’s Shiori, right? She’s just, like, so plain, isn’t she?”

Mia and Vivi giggled together.

“She looks really young, but I heard a rumor that she’s almost thirty, or maybe even over thirty.”

“You’re kidding! What’s that about? She’s trying to make herself look way younger. That’s so gross.”

Alec smiled as he spoke with this Shiori woman. It was a very kind smile, one he didn’t often give to others. And no matter how hard Sheila looked, it seemed his feelings for this woman were—

Anger simmered in Sheila’s heart. She hated this.

Mia and Vivi continued. “She doesn’t look like much, but they say she’s B-rank.”

“What? No way. What does she do?”

“I heard she’s a housekeeper. Really, she’s a mage, but she’s so weak there’s no point.”

“And she’s friendly with the Master and Clemens too, right? You think maybe she seduced them?”

“Then maybe ‘housekeeper’ actually has some other secret meaning. Like an, ‘I will serve your comforts in the night as well,’ type of thing.”

“Oh, yuck!”

For this housekeeper or whatever to be at his side when she wasn’t even beautiful or anything, and so weak as to be useless on top of that... Sheila couldn’t stand it. She was so much stronger than that woman, and much better looking too.

“Hey, why don’t we sort of give it a try?”

“Give what a try?”

“Well, if she’s B-rank, she must be way stronger than us, right? So let’s see if it’s true.”

Vivi had just said something very interesting.

“I like that,” said Sheila. It was a good idea. And it wasn’t like it would be hard. The three of them eagerly worked up a plan. They, the promising newcomers, would denounce and remove the old maid who’d cheated her way up to the middle ranks. Sheila and the others were enthralled with their scenario. When that woman ended up helpless at the hands of a trio of C-rankers, she’d lose face and be sorely embarrassed. If that happened, then Sheila was sure that Alec wouldn’t smile at that woman anymore.

And just maybe, it might make him see her...

2

“Firefly mushrooms, *skogh manietel*—also known as forest seamoon caps—and moonlight butterflies... Yes, I have received everything. And the quality leaves nothing to be desired. This really helps me so much.”

Nils Aulin, an herbalist physician, treated the items he'd requested with great care as he accepted them, and gave a rueful smile as he rubbed his leg. Normally, he would never entrust the gathering of ingredients for his medicines to someone else, but the other day, he'd injured his leg while out on a job and then been ordered to rest for a month because of it. Simply walking didn't pose too much of a problem. However, for the time being, he was going to have to refrain from any work that took him out of town.

His herb garden at home would serve to provide ingredients for the medicines he sold in his shop, but it wasn't sufficient for the specially commissioned items for which he'd already received orders. And that's why he'd put in a request for Alec and the others.

"Just don't try to do too much. Make sure you rest up properly. If you need anything, we'll go gather them for you." Nadia smiled bewitchingly.

Nils thanked her as he signed the request ticket to show that it had been completed. Just as he was about to hand it back, Nils's brows furrowed slightly. He seemed to be looking at something behind Alec. Thinking it strange, the others turned to look, but all they could see was the inside of the shop and the scene outside the window.

"What is it?"

"Um..." Nils stood with a frown. He limped slightly as he moved to the window. As he gazed outside, he appeared to be pondering something.

Alec exchanged a glance with the others, then walked over to join Nils at the window. Outside was the main street that led to the East Gate. The shopping and market districts stretched along either side of the road, bustling and prosperous with customers and travelers.

"Look over there."

When Alec looked across the street to where Nils had pointed, he saw Shiori having a friendly chat with the proprietress of the general store. Rurii bounced around at their feet, being pleasant to everyone and trying to get anyone who walked by to smile. Two people called out to Shiori in passing and she waved back at them. Customers exiting the shop talked with her too, then walked away smiling brightly. It was a scene that showed how much the people of the

town liked her.

“Shiori?” asked Ellen. “What about her?”

Nils shook his head. “It’s...look over there. Next to the secondhand bookshop that’s off to the side.”

Alec looked in the direction he’d indicated and saw three girls that didn’t quite fit in with the other people passing by. They were dressed like adventurers, and at first glance, they looked as though they were just amusing themselves, chatting on the street corner. But after observing them for a little while, he could see that their attention frequently turned in Shiori’s direction. The girls laughed. Their smiles seemed crass somehow.

“I don’t really like those smiles of theirs,” Linus muttered. He must have had the same thought as Alec.

“For some reason, those girls have been following her around of late. They always watch her like that from a little ways off. At first, I thought it was simply coincidence, but now...” Nils told them that the girls had taken up a position in front of his shop yesterday too, watching Shiori shopping across the street. They’d spoken in whispers and laughed mockingly from time to time.

“It might be one of those ‘bullying the small fry’ things.”

“Small fry?” asked Alec.

Nadia exchanged looks with Ellen and Linus. Their expressions were bitter.

“You’re a vanguard, so you probably wouldn’t be familiar with it. It happens a lot in the rear guard, adventurers harassing other adventurers.”

Unlike vanguards who attacked targets up close, rear guards were often looked down upon because their contributions weren’t as visible, and so harder to understand. When people expressed that condescension openly in their demeanor, it was what was known as “rear guard bullying.” They complained that rear guards only supported from safe ground, or that they had it easy in the back—those kinds of things. Basically, they said that people who couldn’t directly participate in battle shouldn’t be judged in the same way as vanguards.

“I’ve heard about rear guards getting harassed,” said Alec, “but what’s this

‘small fry’ thing?”

“It’s an insult used for herbalist physicians and physickers like us, or for her as a housekeeping mage. For any noncombatant,” explained Nils. “We’re so weak we can’t fight and we die easily, so they call us ‘small fry.’”

Ellen took up the explanation. “Other rear guards—the ones who can participate in battles, like attack-type mages or summoners—also like and use that insult. They say that they fight very well even though they’re in the rear guard, so when people who can’t fight act like they’re adventurers, it’s just not right.”

“But fighting and defeating magical beasts isn’t all that adventurers do. And it’s because you give us support that we can draw on our full strength to fight. Why would anyone...?” Alec was lost for words.

“It just means that there are people who don’t think that way,” said Nadia. “Once you get to B-rank, there really aren’t many who would say such stupid things. At lower ranks, you can get by without support positions, so they don’t understand their value. The attitude tends to be particularly prominent in the ones who show a lot of promise early on. They turn to bullying small fries... See? Take a look at those girls.” Nadia pointed to them with a jerk of her chin.

Alec turned his gaze back to the girls. One of them appeared to be a magic swordsman. There was also a mage and an archer. Their demeanor was strangely haughty for people who had only just passed the threshold between adult and little girl. The incongruity was laughable.

“I think they just got promoted to C-rank,” said Linus. “They advanced faster than other people who started at the same time as them, so they’ve gotten full of themselves. They’ve been telling rookies what they should do and giving advice to senior adventurers. Everyone’s getting a little sick and tired of it. But I never thought they’d try something on Shiori.”

Nadia chimed in. “And Shiori had that big success recently, right? There was that noble’s messenger who came by. It seems to have made people jealous.”

That had been because of the uproar over the missing children the other day. The memory of Elias coming to call, carrying a handwritten letter from the current head of the count’s family in hand and offering their ardent gratitude,

was fresh in Alec's mind. Along with the thanks, Elias had given Alec and Clemens enthusiastic handshakes. And when it came to Shiori, the way Elias had spoken so loudly in praise of her magnificent work in saving them, and pressed her to accept an assortment of high-quality soaps, had left her a bit bewildered and embarrassed. Apparently, that had made some of the newer adventurers who didn't know her suspicious. They wondered how a low-level mage—a housekeeper of all things—could receive praise like that.

As they watched, Shiori finished her conversation with the proprietress. Shiori waved goodbye and started walking toward the East Gate. Seeing that, the girls exchanged a look, nodded, and began tailing her, following a set distance behind.

"What d'you want to do? This doesn't look like it's going to turn into anything good."

Everyone let out a little groan at Linus's question. When people shadowed someone they didn't seem to think well of, one could be fairly certain that they weren't thinking of anything honorable.

"Shiori isn't B-rank for nothing, after all. She should be able to handle it." Nadia's mouth spoke the words, but on the inside, she was probably worried. Both Ellen and Nils seemed uneasy.

"Should we go and see?" asked Alec.

Though Shiori was B-rank and the girls were C-rank, in terms of pure fighting strength, it was clear that the girls had a tremendous advantage. Alec didn't want to consider the possibility, but if the worst came to pass...

"Please tell me how everything turns out later." Nils bid them goodbye, and they started walking after the girls.

"Well, this isn't looking good." Nadia spoke in a low voice.

Linus and Ellen wore serious expressions. Shiori had left the town, perhaps because of some quest she'd accepted. And the girls tailing her had followed with no hesitation.

"They've all left the town. I wonder what those girls are planning to do," said

Linus.

“You don’t think they mean to harm her, do you?”

Nadia hesitated. “I’d hate to think that those little idiots would go that far.” As she spoke, there was a hint of anxiety in her voice. After all, there were those who’d hurt Shiori before.

As adventurers were people who put themselves in the thick of battle, there were a lot of hot-blooded types among them. Private duels between adventurers were forbidden under Guild rules, but there were times that minor disputes led to bloodshed. And it was unfortunate, but feelings of jealousy toward colleagues who were doing well, or perhaps contempt for people with less aptitude, stupidly caused more than a few people to resort to bullying. The Akatsuki incident had shown aspects of that as well.

Shiori turned off the road onto a little path that led into the forest. The girls appeared to hesitate, perhaps fearing that they might be too conspicuous on a small track that few people traveled as opposed to the main road, with all of its foot traffic. Then, they apparently decided to proceed. After they’d gone down the path a little ways, they looked around, then headed into the nearby bushes as if to hide themselves.

“That settles it. They’re definitely planning something bad,” said Linus.

“There’s that, and they also don’t seem to have noticed that they’re being tailed... Just shows what they amount to.” Alec had been wondering how useful they might be, since they’d been getting arrogant, but this suggested that they might not notice a magical beast approaching. It was both astonishing and exasperating. Either they’d had incredibly good luck up to this point, or they’d had a string of good fortune with regards to the locations they’d ended up in.

“They’re being entirely too careless,” said Ellen.

“Shiori seems to have noticed them, though. Probably noticed us too.”

There was a net of magical energy so exceedingly faint and subtle that it could only be detected by those who had a good understanding of magic and were also on guard. Shiori was probably being as vigilant as she could without risking magical exhaustion.

The difference between the skilled hand of a person who had, in spite of being weak, achieved her rank through hard work and clever adaptations, and those arrogant, inexperienced girls, was abundantly clear. It was certain that they'd grown careless because they placed too much faith in their own abilities. Sooner or later, that would land them in a painful situation.

The girls probably didn't have the slightest idea that they were being harshly criticized while also being tailed. Showing no sign that they'd noticed Alec and the others, they single-mindedly pursued Shiori.

Shiori stopped in a forest clearing. She seemed to be concerned about something behind her, but she crouched down and began collecting something—likely autumn berries. She continued gathering for a little while, but soon she stopped, stood, and looked behind her. Her gaze turned in the direction of the girls. And they, having never imagined that they might be noticed, appeared to be a little shaken.

As had been the case all along, the girls didn't seem to notice Alec and the others even though they'd drawn very close. Perhaps it was the fact that they were in a nearby forest which made them underestimate the situation, or else, they'd never had the intellect for more than that in the first place.

Alec had already lost interest in the girls. They amounted to so little that they weren't even worth thinking about. And as they were doing things like following their colleagues around with ill intent, it called into question their qualities—not just as adventurers, but as people.

To tell the truth, the Guild served as a receptacle for people with special circumstances, so there were more of these kinds of ill-natured adventurers than might be expected. Those types tended to get weeded out naturally.

Also, while the time needed for promotion varied, anyone could advance to C-rank unless they were extraordinarily incompetent. The question was whether a person could progress past that point. Novices had no way of knowing, but there was a barrier between C-rank and B-rank that couldn't be overcome by average means. A fair amount of hard work was necessary to surmount it. This wasn't a world people could survive if they challenged it using only what they'd gotten from their parents. The only exceptions to this might be in the Empire,

where the rule of aristocracy had wormed its way even into the Guild.

Keeping Shiori and the girls at the edge of their vision, Alec and the others moved to a location where they could hear their voices. If the worst happened, they were ready to step in and stop things, but they thought it was probably best if they interfered as little as possible. Shiori had her pride as a mid-ranking adventurer too. Simply jumping in to protect her would only serve to hurt that pride.

It was true that in terms of pure fighting strength, Shiori wasn't as good as the girls, but Alec had the feeling that she might have an unexpectedly easy time dealing with them. She was not by any means a helpless woman. He'd seen that very clearly the other day in the uproar over the missing children.

Suddenly, Rurii changed the direction it was facing. The slime seemed to have noticed Alec and the others, sensing their presence in the air. But, perhaps perceiving no ill intent, or guessing who they were, Rurii soon turned back around.

The girls stepped out to confront Shiori and Rurii. Now, how would this turn out? Alec and the others watched over the scene with their weapons at the ready, just in case.

3

Shiori said goodbye to the proprietress of her usual general store, where she'd gone to pick up an order for various sundries to be used on expeditions, and headed toward the East Gate. Now that autumn was deepening, the lingonberries were probably ready to be picked. Eaten as they were, the berries were tart, but when boiled down with sugar, they made a sauce that went very well with meats.

She exchanged a greeting with the familiar female knight standing guard at the gate, and amidst the lovely weather of a clear autumn day, began walking down the main road. There were a number of berry patches scattered through the forest. She stopped for a moment before entering the trees and cast search magic. The danger was relatively low here, and lots of people made their way in to pick berries and mushrooms and things, but it was best to be careful. There

was no guarantee that a person wouldn't run across magical beasts, or bandits, or something of that sort. Since Shiori knew she lacked fighting strength, any time she left town and went somewhere with few people, she was never without her search magic.

Shiori had felt eyes on her since before she'd left town, so she made sure to be especially conscientious about it now. Lately, she just couldn't shake the sense that someone was watching her.

Not long after she'd turned onto the side path that led into the forest, the edge of her search magic picked up three presences. They appeared to be headed in her direction and maintaining a fixed distance. Then, more presences. This time, there were...four of them. They were also drawing closer, following both the three previously detected presences and herself.

"What is all this," Shiori wondered aloud.

As there wasn't anyone around to see, Rurii had spread out unreservedly into a shapeless, thickly liquid form as befitted a slime. So far, it hadn't shown any conspicuous reaction. If Rurii wasn't worried, then there probably wasn't a problem. At least, not right now. The feeling of being watched by persistent, clinging gazes made Shiori uncomfortable.

A clearing beyond the bushes that lined the path came into sight. It was a lingonberry patch.

"Oh, there's still a lot here."

Shiori glanced behind her, toward the presences she'd felt. It seemed like it would take a little time for them to reach her. She crouched down and pushed her way through the distinctive leaves, with their luster and slight thickness, to pick the glossy scarlet lingonberries. A little red mountain grew in the container she'd brought.

This must be the right time to pick them.

The set of three presences had drawn very close. Rurii returned to its steamed bun shape and focused its attention in that direction. Standing, Shiori fixed her gaze that way as well. She could hear whispered voices coming from the other side of the bushes. And beyond that, the other four presences once

again traveled on a slightly different course from the first three and came to a stop.

Rurii moved suddenly, seemingly interested in the other four presences. But the slime quickly returned to its previous stance.

Three girls poked their heads out of the nearby bushes with a rustling noise.

Oh, this looks like it's going to be a bother.

They looked toward Shiori with unpleasant smiles that ruined their beautiful faces. Shiori thought she remembered seeing them before. They had joined the Guild about a year ago, and she'd heard that they'd recently been promoted to C-rank. Shiori's colleagues had grumbled about them, saying that they'd gotten cocky and overbearing because they'd advanced so much more quickly than their peers. They didn't listen to advice from adventurers with more experience than them. On the contrary, they offered their own advice to senior adventurers. And there were rumors that they caused trouble for the Guild's clerical staff because they were so picky about the requests they took on.

When she'd seen them at the Guild, Shiori had noticed that they'd been looking at her in an unfriendly, appraising way. Could they be the ones who had been watching her lately?

One of the girls, who appeared to be a mage as Shiori herself was, spoke. "Nice work noticing us. You may be rotten, but I suppose you're still B-rank. Right, old lady?"

The other girls snickered in contempt.

Well, normally, anyone would notice that. Shiori found herself exasperated with these girls who seemed honestly surprised even as they scoffed. They couldn't really have thought they hadn't been spotted, could they?

Shiori knew that there were people who looked down on the rear guard, particularly those in support positions, having arbitrarily decided that they were incompetent and of no use. And she'd had many a hard time because of those kinds of attitudes. That said, this was just too stupid.

While it was difficult for novices to sense presences, by the time they reached D-rank, they'd usually gotten a bit of a feel for it so that they could be more

useful. Naturally, unless they were very skilled, it would always be difficult to do in places with lots of people, like in town. But outside of populated areas, presences could be detected through smells, sounds, and any number of other slight incongruities in the surrounding area. It was something that adventurers learned through experience, by going out into the field and fulfilling requests.

Shiori remembered something Zack had once said to her. *"This is just a personal theory, but I think people who work solo learn faster than people in parties. Maybe it's because they only have themselves to depend on, but they end up with a strong sense of caution and wariness."*

And it was true that even she herself, who had a dulled awareness of danger from being born and raised in a peaceful country, had learned to sense presences. Though, because she was aware that she was weak, she'd learned through trial and error how to extend the range of her awareness through magic so that she could reliably determine how close others were to her.

"...faster than people in parties." That fragment of Zack's words came back to her.

Could it be that these girls had been promoted without knowing how to sense presences? Arrogant with the high level of their abilities in the early days, careless after completing a few jobs, and ignorant of important basic skills that would keep them safe... Apparently, sometimes there were people like that.

Come to think of it, Nadia had once mentioned something on the subject. *"They get lucky and never experience failure, so they misjudge their own abilities."*

A little exasperated, Shiori asked the girls, "Is there something I can help you with?"

They didn't seem to like that. Their expressions turned petulant.

"Well, you've been getting cocky lately."

"And we have some doubts about whether you're really B-rank, old lady. I mean, you're just a housekeeper, and you have basically no magical power. The only thing you ever do is chores. We just think it's strange that someone like that would be B-rank."

Basically no magical power. Having her shortcomings—the weaknesses she really didn't want anyone to mention—poked at made Shiori angry, but she didn't show it in her expression. And she hoped she wasn't so childish that she would get truly furious with immature girls—girls who believed that the phrase “old lady” was scathing abuse.

“So what, specifically, is it that you want from me?”

They'd followed her all the way to this deserted spot. They must have something planned. They'd probably expected her to react with fear or anger, so when all she gave them was calm, their frustration grew more and more evident.

“Looks like you don't get it! Is it because you're an old lady? Like, your brain's old too?”

“We're saying that we girls are going to see if you're really worthy of being B-rank!”

The girl dressed like a magic swordsman and the one that looked like an archer took up their weapons with pretentious, exaggerated movements. The mage girl thrust her wand forward threateningly.

To think they're pointing their weapons at an unarmed opponent. And there are people watching too... I guess they really haven't noticed the other presences.

As exasperating as Shiori found the girls' imprudent behavior, the clear threat in their actions made her freeze in place. The four presences beyond them didn't move. It seemed they didn't intend to help. Having said that, she didn't sense any malice from them either. Perhaps they were monitoring these girls, who had recently become conspicuous for their arrogance and their disputes with their colleagues.

Well then, what to do now? How could she make it through this situation?

“No, thank you,” said Shiori. “I don't believe you could make an impartial evaluation as you so clearly bear me ill will. I'm sure you're aware that I do not do battle. With three fighters against one unarmed noncombatant, you can't complain if you're judged to have malicious intent. I believe you must also be

aware that, under Guild rules, private duels are prohibited.”

Shiori had given the girls a warning, though they likely wouldn't listen. And she'd included the possibility that they'd consider it to be provocation in her calculations. As the person they looked down on as incompetent was not rising to their taunts, and was instead calmly admonishing them, Shiori was certain they must be getting angry. These immature girls who had a foolishly strong and baseless confidence in their own abilities were sure to rise to her provocation. In a fight, even one-on-one, Shiori would definitely lose, but if they did as she expected, then she had a chance of winning. After all, the more frenzied people were, the less they were able to make calm, rational judgments, and the more easily they would get caught up in her specialty—illusion magic.

Sure enough, the girls did as she'd predicted and flew into a rage. Furious, the magic swordsman drew her sword. The archer and mage pointed their respective weapons at Shiori. Bloodlust. Rurii instantly turned red. The slime had responded to their killing intent by readying itself for battle.

In this situation, whoever had raised their weapon first had lost. With witnesses present, the action would be seen as a violation of Guild rules. Even more than that, if they continued in their attack and caused bodily harm, and things went wrong, it could become murder.

The four presences covertly watching the situation moved. There was a slight tremor in the magical power around them. It seemed likely that they were readying themselves to respond to an attack. That pretty much settled it. As she'd thought, it was the girls who were being watched. The fact that those four had deliberately not tried to conceal their presence could have been meant to show that they bore no malice toward her.

Enraged, the girls hurled verbal abuse at her all at once.

“You're just a housekeeper who can't fight! How dare you!”

“You seduced the Master to get him to promote you, right? You seem pretty friendly with Clemens too! You cozy up to the high-ranking adventurers so that they go easy on you in your assessments, don't you?”

“Lately, you've even been overfamiliar with Alec! Dressing up to look younger

when you're an old lady—it's disgusting!"

Shiori deduced from the names that popped out of the girls' mouths that jealousy was involved in this. It was true that they were all good men. They were high-ranking adventurers with handsome features, and every single one was a bachelor. There were a lot of women with their sights set on the position of being their sweethearts. And Shiori had been harassed like this more than once.

However, the reason Shiori herself was friendly with these men was because she was close to them in rank, so they were often on jobs together. And there was the fact that they had protected and looked after her when she'd had nowhere to go.

If these girls insulted her, that was one thing, but when they disparaged the others too... Shiori couldn't stand it. They were kind people who had taken in a woman of unknown origins and done everything they could for her so that she'd be able to live on her own. But when it came to work, they were strict—tough both on themselves and others. They faced every job head-on, regardless of how important or modest it might be, and they always achieved good results. When colleagues made mistakes, they didn't blame them, but anyone who did a shoddy or careless job would get hit with relentless reprimands. That was how much pride they took in their work.

And the scars, so many of them—on an arm, peeking out from under the cuff of a sleeve; or on a chest, glimpsed through the gap in a collar—and none of them trivial. Shiori knew that there must be so many more in places that couldn't be seen. It was clear that the path they had traveled to reach their current positions hadn't been a smooth one. Would people who had suffered so much to achieve their standing really just succumb to flattery and change evaluations at their own discretion?

"Take that back." Shiori was not happy. "Those people aren't so simple or cheap as to be fooled by seduction traps. Don't you understand? Right now, by speaking ill of me, you are also indirectly insulting them."

Those girls probably hadn't realized that what they'd said showed contempt for those men.

“They take pride in their work. And they do this work that they take pride in honestly. They are not people that you, who so easily look down on others, should ever disparage.”

Growing arrogant without having worked hard at anything, getting obsessed with bullying instead of doing their jobs... For people like that to criticize others was presumptuous and absurd.

No, that wasn't it. That wasn't where this anger was coming from.

Shiori took her rage and put it into her magic. She sent her power through the net of magical energy that stretched through the area along with a clear intention to attack.

The girls shrank back, shaken by a powerful sense of aggression—a hostility that could even be called bloodlust.

Since they insisted, I'll grant their wish and let them see for themselves whether I'm worthy of being B-rank or not.

Using her outstretched mesh of magical power as a point of reference, Shiori took the image of “fury” she had in her mind and gave it form.

Snap. The ground at her feet cracked, and leaves and pebbles flew into the air. Tree branches broke with unsettling creaking, splitting noises. The cord that held Shiori's hair tore away and her black hair whirled upward as she stood at the center of magical power that spun and surged with rage.



The girls shuddered in the face of Shiori's ferocious illusion—Torrent of Fury. They didn't recognize that it wasn't real.

A strangled shriek escaped the magic swordsman girl. The archer, confused, pointed her bow at Shiori. If the girl let that arrow fly, Shiori knew it wouldn't leave her unscathed, but she didn't care about that right now. She wanted these girls to understand the feelings she held within her.

Shiori took the jet-black magical power that twined around her and sent it to coil around the girls, as though it were trapping them. Rage, despair, grief... Shiori took every negative emotion and set it into her magic.

Gasp! The mage girl's legs gave out and she fell on her bottom. A warm fluid seeped out from between her legs and stained the ground where she sat. Almost as if that were some kind of signal, the other two fled with soundless screams.

"...no, wait, please, wait!" Left behind, the mage girl wriggled and crawled, trying to get away from Shiori. Somehow, she got to her feet and ran off, paying no mind to her damp clothes.

"What is that? What's going on? That's not the kind of presence a noncombatant gives off." Linus spoke in a low voice, his body shaking.

Nadia gave him a bewitching, fierce smile. "Shiori knows how to use magic efficiently, you see. It's more than enough to make up for her lack of magical power."

When the girls' figures had disappeared into the forest, quiet suddenly returned. Rurii reverted to its original ruri stone blue color, and Shiori stood there looking no different than her usual, everyday self. It was like nothing had ever happened. The scene looked peaceful, as it always did. The ground that should have been cracked was level and smooth. Branches that should have been snapped from the trees still reached beautifully up toward the sky, while a gentle breeze set their leaves rustling. Shiori's black hair, which should have been disheveled from being blown around, was sleek and perfectly in order, also as if nothing had happened. Rurii gave a little jelly-like shake in its usual carefree way.

“Impressive. Just as you’d expect.” Alec’s words of praise were succinct. They hadn’t needed to intervene. She had easily countered and beaten her opponents, though they had been overwhelmingly stronger in attack power.

“Right? That technique combines the emission of magical power with illusion magic.”

“What? Those were illusions?!” Linus’s voice rose wildly. He was the only one there who couldn’t read the flow of magic.

“She sent magical power mixed with an intention to attack along the net she’d spread through the area to create a feeling of bloodlust. Everything else, including the sounds, was produced through illusion magic. It was magnificent. She must be really good at reproducing the images she creates in her mind.”

“Wow...” Linus’s admiration showed in his voice. He looked back at Shiori. “So, that’s why Rurii turned red too?”

“No, that wasn’t an illusion. The slime really turned red.” Nadia scowled as she spat the words. “When anyone with murderous intent gets close, Rurii turns red like that as a warning. So that means those little idiots really did mean to kill Shiori.”

The corners of Nadia’s mouth turned down with distaste as she suggested that it was probably best that they report this to the Guild.

“Just as I’d thought, they were the type to easily get caught in an illusion.”

They heard Shiori’s voice. She was talking with Rurii.

“That sort—the ones who trust their own abilities too much—tend to neglect to plan countermeasures for when they encounter danger. It’s because their lack of knowledge in confronting peril is so overwhelmingly lacking that they cannot calculate risks. They were tricked so easily it was almost entertaining.”

Rurii bounced once in seeming agreement.

It was exactly as she’d said. When people overestimated their own abilities, it made them careless in planning for danger, and no few adventurers had lost their lives to low-level magical beasts or simple traps because of it. Those girls had been a prime example. They’d quickly risen to their opponent’s provocation

and very easily gotten snared in illusions. If they continued like this, sooner or later, they'd end up dead. If it had been a magical beast or someone with malicious intent instead of Shiori that they'd faced, their lives would surely have been ended by now.

"But... 'getting cocky,' was it? That's a problem." Shiori's voice suddenly grew brittle.

Alec stared at her face without realizing. Perhaps it was because he was looking at her through the bushes, but she seemed a little pale to him. When Alec saw her press her hands to her chest and droop forward a little, he instantly moved to go to her. Nadia stopped him with a gentle hand on his arm.

"You've watched this much in silence. Pretend you didn't see what comes next, for her sake. If you go out there now, you'll only hurt her pride."

"But..."

"Women have things that they don't want men to see. Men have that kind of thing too, don't they? So just...leave her be, just for now." Nadia's honey brown eyes trembled with heartbreak, but they held a strong, uncompromising light.

"All right." Alec still had reservations, but he understood. He nodded.

"Thank you." Nadia's eyes softened as she smiled at him, then looked at Linus and Ellen.

The two of them were hesitant, but they understood what she was trying to say. They nodded, and after a quick glance at Shiori, they turned and began to walk off. Nadia followed them.

Alec turned to look at Shiori one more time. She stood very still, eyes downcast. It looked to Alec as though she were trying to endure something. The urge to race up behind her and hold her tightly tried to spur him forward, but he throttled it back.

He began walking back toward town.

Then, a little while after they'd left her—Alec thought he heard the wild sobbing of a woman unable to bear her sorrow.

"Getting cocky," was it? Shiori bit her lip.

Those words hadn't been a complaint. They'd clearly been meant to hurt. And Shiori felt that if she could be said to be "getting cocky," then what about those girls?

Yes, that's right. It hadn't just been the way the girls had disparaged the people she was close to that had infuriated her. The truth was, she'd just felt upset and humiliated by the insults they'd directed at her personally. They'd ignored everything she felt, all the hard work she'd put in to get this far, and decided they didn't like her, finding fault where they could. She'd felt bitterly frustrated, that was all.

A burning pain crept steadily through her breast as a dark wave of emotion swelled within her.

She pressed a hand to her chest.

Won't they leave any faster?

Several presences had stopped nearby, as if watching over her. But Shiori didn't want anyone to see. She didn't want anyone to see her in the grips of such dark feelings.

Perhaps the presences understood that. They left quietly, one by one. Even the presence that lingered until the very end eventually moved away from that spot.

And then, after a little while, the four presences disappeared from inside Shiori's search magic net.

That's a relief.

Shiori was grateful for their consideration—for the fact that they hadn't shown themselves and that they had decided not to watch any more. And as she felt this gratitude, she collapsed on the spot.

"You have basically no magical power."

"You're just a housekeeper! How dare you!"

The words those girls had used were the same words of contempt that people she had once thought were her companions, and others who were displeased with her, had thrown at her.

Shiori had been taken from her homeland—a place where she'd never experienced a single true hardship—and been tossed into an unfamiliar world with no belongings, nothing but herself. And she hadn't been given a duty she must fulfill or had splendid powers bestowed upon her like the heroine in a story. She didn't understand the language. She didn't know anyone there. She didn't have anything. She'd had to build herself a life in this world starting completely from scratch.

Wanting to adapt as quickly as possible, she'd desperately learned the language. She'd read every piece of writing she could lay her hands on, and she'd given up time for eating and sleeping to build up her knowledge so that it was ready to be put to use whenever it was needed.

In the beginning, she'd tried to find somewhere to work. But even though this country was one that accepted a lot of immigrants, Easterners were rarely seen here or in the neighboring countries. Since she looked Eastern, and had unusual circumstances on top of that, there hadn't been anywhere that would readily hire her. And while she didn't have any trouble with everyday conversation, there had been some who'd kept her at a distance, saying that the slight difficulties she continued to have with the way she worded things negatively affected her work.

Shiori had grown up amidst a peace that had dulled her senses, so she hadn't thought she'd be able to become an adventurer, but she'd had no other choice. She couldn't use a sword or a bow, and her very last hope—her magical power—had proved so weak as to be useless in battle. It was precisely because she was so lacking that she'd worked so desperately to improve her skills.

She'd gathered medicinal herbs and looked for lost items, helped search for missing children and done people's shopping for them. And the reason she'd taken all the dull jobs that even novice adventurers avoided was because she'd wanted people to accept her.

Using the information she'd had at hand, together with any new knowledge she gained, she had devised adaptations for herself, creating her own sort of magical techniques, and continued to pour her blood, sweat, and tears into her efforts. She'd thought that she'd gained a fairly good reputation.

And yet...

Many a harsh gaze fell upon combat support members because they were weak in battle. No matter how hard they worked, they weren't valued as highly as those in positions like swordsmen or attack-type mages, who produced results that were easy to see. Instead, they tended to be criticized and judged. Shiori had given herself the title of housekeeping mage, but really, she was simply a housekeeper who could use a little magic. It wasn't that she couldn't see what they were trying to say.

Still...

"Don't get above yourself."

She'd been disparaged as a hindrance, as useless. After working even harder, she had thought she'd achieved good results, but now she was told she was "getting cocky." And there was malicious gossip saying that she'd gained her reputation by cheating.

"What do they want from me?" No matter what she did or didn't do, cruel words came to hurt her. "What do they know?"

How could people who had so easily gained recognition and appreciation understand this pain? How could they understand the bitterness of being belittled, no matter how hard they worked or how successful they were? She'd been thrown into this place with nothing but herself and no choice but to start working at a job she wasn't used to. She'd had to struggle so hard to survive that she hadn't cared how she'd appeared to others. The pain of desperately scrambling to remain alive... How could anyone else understand that?

A sob escaped Shiori's lips. Then another. Her nails dug into the dirt where her hands pressed against the ground, grazing her fingertips. Blood welled in the scrapes, but that pain was nothing. It was trivial when compared to the anger and bitterness that slashed at her, and the sorrow that stabbed her heart.

"Aaaaahhhhh!" Shiori howled, weeping, thinking of this world she'd been left in, of herself, not knowing any way to get home, of the four years she'd spent desperately trying to survive, and of that day when she'd been abandoned as useless.

The wailing lamentation of her spirit tore through the quiet peace of the woods.

A small form, ruri stone blue and filled with tender kindness, gently snuggled close to her.

Twilight had fallen and the number of people leaving town had dwindled. Those hurrying home were drawn through the gate as though they were being sucked in. Shiori was among them. She walked slowly, feeling heavy with exhaustion from weeping.

It had gotten very late. By the time she'd cried and screamed until she felt better, and spent some time in the woods to give the swelling and redness in her face a chance to calm down after her tears, the sky had already turned a warm madder red. Almost time for the gates to be shut. She sped her steps a little and hurried toward town.

Shiori stopped in place when she recognized a familiar man standing at the entrance of the East Gate. He looked irritated and restless, pacing back and forth with his arms crossed. The knight standing guard regarded him with a suspicious eye.

The man raised his head and looked Shiori's way. Their eyes met.

"Shiori!" When Alec recognized her, he came rushing over. "Shiori."

Though he seemed on the verge of saying more, he closed his mouth without uttering another word. Hesitantly, he reached his hand toward her cheek, but stopped before it brushed against her skin. Instead, he quietly swept her into an embrace.

"Alec." Shiori tensed at his unexpected actions. But his hand gently patted her back, soothing her, and slowly she relaxed.

It's so warm. Resting her face against his strong, broad chest, Shiori allowed herself to be held, her eyes half closing in the warmth.

Oh, I see, she thought. It must have been him back then, watching over her from so close by. And it had been he who had left so that her ugly, shameful wailing wouldn't be seen. That's why he'd been worried and waited for her

here.

She didn't know why he showed so much concern for her, but right now, she just wanted to yield herself to this tender, enveloping warmth.

"Let's head back. The gate's about to close."

After a moment, Shiori spoke. "Yes."

The hands that patted her back released her and the gentle restraint of his arms fell away, leaving her free. Without pause, he gently took her hand and used it to draw her along, heading back toward town.

Sure enough, there was warmth in the hand that held hers.

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"I see... She was able to take care of it on her own." Nils sighed with relief, and his expression relaxed.

"And she even managed to drive them off without a scratch when they'd already drawn their weapons. Either those sneering girls misjudged things, or Shiori was a step or two ahead of them."

"I'm not sure it was either of those things. If those girls had kept their composure, it would have been easy for them to take care of someone of Shiori's level. But she's someone who stays levelheaded no matter the situation, and always looks for a way to survive. Even if the girls had stayed calm, I feel like Shiori would have found a way to escape."

"That's true," Linus added his agreement, then looked out the window to where the townscape of Tris was dyed in sunset colors. "The thing is, if I'm being honest, back when she first became an adventurer, I thought she'd soon either quit or die. I mean, her magical power is weak, and it's not like she had special techniques or anything. To say nothing of the fact that she was an outsider who wasn't fluent in our language. But she just kept searching for her own path, and before I knew it, she'd established herself as an adventurer."

Especially in the beginning, people would watch her and half joke about how long she would last. But Shiori just worked hard and honestly to complete

requests, and found her own unique way to fight by using the abilities she had to their fullest. She was promoted to D-rank within a few months, and by that time, people had completely changed their view of her.

If you earnestly dive into your work with diligent effort and dedication, a path will open to you. That was the truth which she demonstrated, and it gave hope to adventurers who were troubled over the lacks in their own abilities. Her coming caused many people to change their way of being as well as their way of thinking. Many of those who were considered failures—who'd been ostracized by their peers because of their low abilities, who'd spent every day in their rooms or in corners of the Guild, and who'd occasionally taken on the requests left behind by others—had been influenced by Shiori. They'd resolved to give their all, and now many of them were truly making an honest effort in their work. This was, without a doubt, one of Shiori's achievements as an adventurer.

And that was why those who knew nothing, who never tried to learn anything, and attempted to harm Shiori for no reason were unforgivable.

"Hey, Nils." Linus's words dropped quietly from his lips. "What happened back then, it still bothers you, doesn't it..."

Nils paused before speaking. "It's because I think I might have been the first to notice."

He'd seen the portents of that incident.

When Shiori had come to his shop to buy medicines, he'd had a slight sense that something wasn't right. But he'd turned a blind eye to his feeling of discomfort. How many times had he regretted it since? Back then, if he'd taken action right away, she might not have had to go through that horrible experience.

The people who had accompanied Shiori to his shop were D-rank, the same as she was, and he'd heard that there hadn't been much difference in the timing of their promotions. Nevertheless, there was a definite difference between the quality of their equipment and the quality of hers. It was clear that her companions had recently replaced theirs with new ones, while Shiori was still using the same old pieces she had been up to that point.

He had seen that. And he'd also noticed the strangeness of the fact that she'd

bought far more medicines than the others. Why had he just let it go back then?

As Nils often holed himself up in his shop formulating medicines, or entrusted his store to an employee while he went out gathering, he didn't see Shiori after that. He completely forgot about the uneasy feeling he'd had.

And that was why he'd been terribly shocked when Zack, acting as Shiori's guardian, had come to his shop to ask some questions. Once he'd learned of the strange things occurring around Shiori, he hadn't even had time to help in the investigation before they'd gotten word that she'd gone missing. Nils still couldn't forget the sense of despair that had struck him in that moment, or the uneasiness and impatience he'd felt when he'd gathered up every medicine he could think of and rushed to the free clinic after hearing that she'd been found, but with her health in a bad way and her condition touch and go.

Nils spoke. "So, how will those girls be dealt with? Does it look like they'll be punished for violating Guild rules?"

"Well, there were four witnesses present. I don't think they'll be able to talk their way out of it." Unlike that time with Akatsuki. Linus added that last sentiment with a bitter smile.

Later, C-rank adventurers Sheila Ander, Mia Tern, and Vivi Larety were punished for their actions against B-rank adventurer Shiori Izumi, as they were deemed to be in violation of item four of the Guild rules—private duels are forbidden. The acts of provocation using weapons were judged to be attempts to force a private duel, and the action of choosing an unpopulated area wherein three fighters menaced a single noncombatant was determined to have malicious intent.

Initially, the girls declared their dissatisfaction with the punishment. However, given that there were several witness reports, the girls could have been turned over to the knights and charged with attempt to commit bodily harm or criminal intimidation instead. When this possibility was presented to them, the girls quietly accepted their punishments.

They were each demoted one rank and given one month's suspension.

On the day of their sentencing, mage Vivi Larety submitted a petition to

withdraw from the Guild. It was accepted that same day. Magic swordsman Sheila Ander and archer Mia Tern returned to work after their suspensions were lifted, but they failed to achieve results. On top of that, their peers avoided them, leaving them friendless. After some time had passed, Sheila Ander went missing while on an expedition and was later confirmed dead. Following that, Mia Tern transferred to a branch close to her parents' home and continued to scrape along as an adventurer.

5

It had been frustrating and humiliating that they hadn't had any choice but to run away back there. To think that they hadn't been able to do a thing against that woman, who wasn't supposed to have any strength, while she did whatever she liked to them. Sheila hated it. She really hated it.

"I will not accept this! It was just a little squabble!"

"Sheila...please, don't."

Sitting beside her in her rage, Vivi tried in a tearful voice to get her to stop, but she just couldn't accept this. How could she?

First thing the following morning, they had been called into the guild master's room and told they were being punished with a reprimand and one month's suspension. Raising weapons against Guild colleagues was considered to be provocation and a violation of Guild rules. That's what they'd been told.

But she couldn't accept it. They were being punished and that woman wasn't getting any of the blame? But they were the ones who had been attacked!

"That's right! It's her fault Vivi got soaked from head to toe!" Mia said, sticking up for Vivi, who had been sobbing since they'd stepped into the room.

A man, whom someone had said was an A-rank archer, gave them an exasperated look. He seemed to want to say something.

"That girl getting drenched was something you did yourselves. It was to cover up the fact that she'd had a little accident, right?"

Vivi burst into violent tears. "You're horrible! What proof do you have?"

“Idiot—did you forget what you were told earlier? He said we have several witnesses, didn’t he?”

The words she’d lashed out with were cut down with a single blow by a gaudily beautiful woman.

“The whole thing was seen, from beginning to end. From when you shadowed Shiori in town, to when you pointed your weapons at her in a deserted area to pick a fight, to when you got hit with her counterattack and went scurrying back home... All of it. That does, of course, include the moment when the others left you behind and you had your little accident. To think that you’d blame Shiori for the drenching you gave yourself to cover that up. Honestly, could there be anything more maddening?”

“But... But still...”

There was no way Sheila was accepting this.

“But she attacked us. That’s the truth. Shouldn’t she be punished for that?”

“That was legitimate self-defense. There’s no problem with that. Three fighters turned their weapons on an unarmed noncombatant. Judging from the witness testimony, it’s clear that you were the first to show an intent to kill. Faced with that, who wouldn’t counterattack?”

Everything she said was being struck down. Sheila wasn’t any match for them. She’d gotten the upper hand against peers and novices, winning them over, but there was no hope of her doing the same against high-ranking opponents.

But then, at least...

“Then call these witnesses in and let me speak to them myself. It might be some kind of misunderstanding. Shiori might have deceived them and—”

A loud *bang* rang out through the room, making Sheila jump and cutting off her words. It was the sound of Alec violently slamming his fist into the wall.

“So what you’re saying is that she deceived us into giving false testimony, is that it?”

“What?” It took Sheila a moment to process what Alec had just said.

Had he said “us”? But what did that mean? Just as Sheila was about to ask,

her eyes met his and she froze in place.

He was terrifying. His eyes were as piercingly cold as if he were looking at the one person he hated most in all the world. Sheila was certain that he wouldn't look at even magical beasts that way. She began to tremble. It was just like before, the same feeling as when they'd taken on that woman. She was scared. She was so, so scared.

"We were the ones who saw you there, though you didn't seem to notice us."

That couldn't be. He couldn't have seen, could he? When? And how much?

Sheila went pale. Why, of all people, had it been him?

"If there is any wrongdoing, we do not show leniency, even to colleagues. It seems you underestimated us. After all, you thought us cheap, simple men who would fall to a woman's enticements and go easy on her."

That was what that woman had said. Shiori had told them that, in their frenzy to show their contempt for her, they were unknowingly disparaging these men.

The eyes of the senior adventurers were cold as they looked down on her. Sheila bit her lip and cast her eyes downward. She heard Zack heave a great sigh, then he began to speak.

"There are others who have testified in this matter. We have statements regarding you following her around town and spreading baseless slander within the Guild. Additionally, we've gathered several complaints regarding your behavior toward your work. You think you're too good for this job or something? We can't have you taking that kind of attitude. It makes people question whether they can trust us."

He tossed the documents he held down onto the desk he used to receive visitors with a thud. Sheila thought they must be a collection of information on her and the other girls' behavior.

"Since neither party was injured in this, I had planned to settle the matter without a fuss, but you came here with false testimony and absolutely no sign of regret. I'm sorry, but I'm giving you a penalty of one month's confinement to your homes and a one rank demotion. I'm not accepting any objections. This is on the lenient side already. Legally speaking, what you did qualifies as

attempted bodily harm or criminal intimidation. Even if we handed you over to the knights, you'd have no grounds to complain."

The moment Zack finished speaking, Alec turned to leave.

"If we're done talking, I'm going. I can't stand breathing the same air as these people any longer."

His gaze didn't turn toward Sheila at all. It was like he was saying that he didn't even want to acknowledge her existence.

She hated it. She hated all of it.

Why her? How had things turned out like this?

"I told you, didn't I?! We can't do it with just the two of us!"

If that woman could defeat them on her own, then there was no way they couldn't do the same. Suppressing these giant spiders should be easy. So then, why...?

"We can't handle a request that didn't go through the Guild yet!"

"You agreed to it in the end, didn't you? Don't try to make it all my fault now!"

Vivi had quit right after that meeting. After a rushed goodbye, she'd headed back to her hometown. The hole left by the mage was a large one. But since it was only the loss of one support position, Sheila had thought they'd manage somehow.

Vivi would make the first strike with ranged magic, then Mia would keep them at bay with her bow and arrow. Sheila would cloak her sword in magic and finish with a powerful skill. She'd gotten so used to fighting cooperatively in that pattern, she didn't know any other way to do it. Mia's stalling tactics weren't going to be enough on their own, so Sheila just needed to use her magic to take the lead. That's what she'd been told, but she didn't have the power Vivi did. There was always a delay. A lot of spiders started slipping through. Sheila was attacked while speaking her spells. She broke off her chant

and swung her sword, but since she'd become completely reliant on skills that incorporated magic, she couldn't land a decisive blow with swordwork alone.

They hadn't been able to tackle sites that would have been easy for them before, and their injuries and losses increased. Often, they'd use up all the medicines they'd bought and have to turn back while still en route. More and more of the requests they took on ended up being no better than failures.

"I really think we should bring in another person, don't you?"

After Mia had said that, they'd tried to recruit members, but no one came to them. People gave them a wide berth, saying that just being around them was unpleasant. The attitude was especially obvious among those who were rear guards. That's why they'd had no choice but to work as hard as they could, just the two of them.

They'd received a request in a village where they'd finished a job—exterminate the giant spiders that had settled near a hut used as a rest stop. It had seemed easy. Since they were low-level magical beasts, Sheila had thought that the two of them would be able to handle a minor swarm.

"No... You can't be serious..."

Mia had run out of arrows. No matter how accurate she was, these magical beasts weren't so weak that they could be defeated with a single shot. She'd only brought down a few of them before abruptly losing her means of attack.

"Insect-type magical beasts win by numbers. One is easy to defeat, but if you get surrounded by a swarm, you're in trouble. Even mid-ranking adventurers and above will end up as prey if they don't think carefully about their coordinated tactics."

Now, too late, Sheila remembered her instructor Ludger's words.

"Just before winter, be especially careful of the types that hibernate, like giant spiders and giant ants. They're even fiercer than usual around that time because they're trying to acquire the nutrients they need for hibernation."

Why now? Why was she only remembering this important information now?

Sheila yelped as her foot caught on something and she fell clumsily on her

backside. "What...? No, it can't be..."

A white thread. A sticky strand of spider's silk. It was wrapped around her leg and she couldn't get it off. Quickly, she threw fire magic at it, but another spider replaced the half-burned thread with a new one. Her sword... She'd dropped it when she'd fallen.

She was going to be dragged away. She'd be pulled into the swarm. Numbness started to spread from the foot where she'd been bitten.

"Ah... Aaahhh..." *Mia. Help me, Mia.*

She tried to call for help, but the venom had reached her throat. She couldn't speak properly.

Sheila thought she heard a strangled voice behind her. Then, a sound like someone pushing their way through the bushes in a panic, which quickly faded into the distance.

"N-No..." *Please don't leave me! Help me, Mia!*

The jaws of a giant spider rose right before her eyes.

The scream that she squeezed out with all of her strength reverberated through the space briefly, then disappeared.

"Looks like she's done for."

Ludger Lanellied made the declaration after a single glance at the girl's remains. Anyone could see that she'd long stopped breathing. Her body had been limply tossed aside like an abandoned doll. The soft parts of the corpse had been gnawed away and her face was worn down, covered in mud and blood as if it had been violently dragged. He could just barely see the remnants of the time when she'd been beautiful in the refined line of the contour of her face.

Mia Tern, who had simply stood there pale and trembling, stumbled back a few steps, then collapsed to the ground as though her strings had been cut.

"Urgh...blaaargh..."

It seemed the brutal manner of her friend's death was too much for her.

Ludger watched with cold eyes as Mia crouched on the spot and vomited up all the contents of her stomach. If nothing had happened, he might have had some sympathy for her, but they had brought this on themselves. There was no room for pity here.

“Are you certain this is Sheila Ander?”

No matter how painful it was for her, he needed her to confirm the identity of the body. That’s why he’d brought her along. Mia looked up with a face that had gone past paleness to a deathly pallor, and nodded quickly a few times. Due to the state of the corpse, there wasn’t any way to tell other than the equipment it was wearing, but based on the circumstances, it was very likely that this was the missing Sheila Ander.

“All right. I’m sorry, but I’m going to bury her remains here. We’ll collect her effects and the hair of the deceased, then head back.”

If it had to be done, it should have been a friend who took her hair, but given the situation, that was probably impossible. On behalf of the bereaved, Ludger gathered her effects and her sword, then looked through her blood-covered hair. It had all stuck together as the gore clotted, but he found the cleanest spot he could, and managed to cut off a lock. He placed the hair in a pure white handkerchief he’d brought for the purpose, laid the sword in another cloth, then carefully wrapped them both up. With his magic, he dug a hole in the ground with Sheila at the center. He looked over at Mia where she crouched.

“Hey. You should put some earth over her. Just a handful is enough. It’s your duty as her companion.”

But all she did was sit there and shake her head. She probably didn’t want to look at the thing that used to be her friend anymore. The fear he saw in her eyes told him the thoughts she held in her heart.

It would be good if she could make a comeback from this, but the girl was probably done for. She’d gotten conceited and overreached, then had her self-confidence smashed. Her arrogance had caused her peers to keep their distance. And when the two inexperienced and immature girls had decided to try their hand at a reckless request on their own, this tragedy had been the result.

Ludger sighed and turned his gaze back to the bottom of the hole.

The dark gray skies above were reflected in the vacant eyes that looked into a world that was not this one.

Idiot girl. It had only been a year since he'd taught her the basics as her mentor in the magic sword. She'd had a talent for it. And she'd probably had the right qualities overall. She and her companions were young, but skilled, and they had quickly raced up to C-rank. If she'd continued that way, she'd probably have become a competent adventurer, but maybe because she'd been promoted so quickly, she'd grown conceited and her arrogance ruined her. She'd made light of her work, neglecting it, and didn't even listen to the senior adventurers who'd tried to give her candid advice. On top of all that, she'd tried to shed the blood of a colleague over a personal grudge.

It was the Master's kindness that had allowed things to end with just a demotion and a suspension. But instead of learning from it and starting again, she'd disregarded everything and recklessly headed out into the field—all to prove the surety of her skills.

Still, the cost of her foolishness had been very high.

Oh, she really had been an idiot girl.

"And you ended up paying for your arrogance with your life."

A frigid wind blew, carrying with it the sense that winter was coming.

Chapter 6: We Will Care for Those Who Suddenly Fall III

1

Rising early, Alec was puzzled by a strange ache in his joints. Thinking that he must have slept in an odd position and hurt his muscles or something, he headed to the Guild and picked up a random suppression request.

The job was to eliminate several trolls that had settled in the caves northeast of Tris. There hadn't been any casualties yet, but you could never tell when a group like that would start attacking people. Their thickly muscled bodies, tenacious vitality, and astounding powers of regeneration meant that they were difficult to slaughter with anything less than a full-scale attack, but an A-rank magic swordsman should just about be able to handle it alone, as long as he wasn't careless. And it was possible to get to the caves and back within a day.

Alec walked down an animal path off of the forest's main road that led through a dimly lit grove. Thirty minutes' travel brought him to the caves. The entrance was hidden by low shrubs and overgrown weeds. Beside it stood a troll that was small for its kind. It seemed to be keeping watch. Trolls were magical beasts with low intelligence, but apparently they had enough sense to set a guard. Alec searched for other presences. There weren't many, even including the guard. He could do this.

He clad his sword in flames, and the troll didn't notice. If they couldn't read the flow of magical power, then this would be easy. Alec sprang from the shadows of the trees, closing the distance between them in an instant, and slashed at his opponent. He chopped off its head and used the force of the rebound to attack its vitals and rend it in two. The flames cauterized the cuts and prevented regeneration. The fallen troll scrambled, trying to rejoin with its lower half, but the burned wounds didn't heal and soon it fell into convulsions and breathed its last. That was one.

The rank smell of burning flesh and bloody bodily fluids assailed Alec's nose. Normally, he took no notice of such things, but this time the stink made him feel some discomfort. He grimaced.

Perhaps having heard the commotion outside, three more trolls burst out of the cave. All of them were built bigger than the guard had been. It might not be possible to cut them down.

"Arrow of Light, Leight Pils!"

He brought forth countless shining arrows, taking out the trolls' vision and stopping them in their tracks. They loathed the light, and as they flinched away, Alec took advantage of the opening, carving out a hole in the vitals of the troll closest to him. He poured flame through the wound, burning the troll from the inside. Smoke billowed from its mouth as it died. Sensing bloodlust behind him, Alec sidestepped without turning to look. A club came roaring down where he'd stood, smashing a huge hole in the ground. One of the trolls was still struggling with light blindness, but the tactic didn't seem to have worked as well on the other. It bellowed menacingly.

Alec's joints hurt. And it felt as though there was some illusion of haze clouding his sight. It didn't affect his fighting much, but he was irritated by the minor distractions.

"Ice Needles, Ys Noual!"

He sent thin, sharp icicles flying at his opponent's face. A troll's thickly muscled body was covered in tough hair, making it hard for a blade to penetrate. The face alone was unprotected. Several of the icicles pierced the troll's eyes. It pressed both hands to its face and roared in anguish. Alec immediately closed the distance between them and thrust his sword into the troll's vitals. Leaving the sword in place, he intensified the flames around the blade, turning the wound into smoldering charcoal. In its death throes, the troll sent up a howl that was even louder than the previous one.

Alec leapt back so as not to get trapped under the huge body as it fell, then squared off against the final troll. It was even larger than the last three had been, a giant standing at least three meters tall.

Sweat trickled down Alec's cheek. He was breathing hard. This wasn't right.

He hadn't done anything particularly strenuous, but his stamina was quickly dwindling. It was probably best not to let the fight drag on for too long.

Maybe I should aim for its legs.

With a body of that size, even Alec with his height wouldn't be able to reach its vital points. He released arrows of light once more to steal its vision, circled around behind it, and slashed downward at its unprotected ankles with his magic sword. With its tendons wounded, it pitched forward and fell to its knees. Alec thrust his magic sword toward a weak spot in the troll's back, throwing his full weight behind his blade. The troll howled with rage and thrashed as if trying to shake Alec off. He left his sword in the body of the magical beast and jumped back.

"Lightning Strike, Osca!"

He used all his strength to call lightning magic down on his sword. The troll convulsed a few times, then collapsed with the acrid stench of burned flesh.

Alec searched for presences once more. The only ones he found were those of the small animals that lived in the forest. The suppression request had been completed.

"Ugh..."

The battle was over, but the moment he relaxed, his vision swam and he staggered. Having come all the way to this point, he finally recognized the abnormalities in his condition. Alec heaved a deep sigh. He wiped at his sweat with the hem of his sleeve.

He had a fever. The reason his joints hurt was because he had a fever.

To think I didn't notice until I was out in the field.

Alec wished he hadn't noticed until he'd made it back to town. He still had the aftermath to deal with. And now that he knew he wasn't feeling well, having to walk more than an hour to get back was going to be rough, both mentally and in terms of stamina.

Moving sluggishly, Alec retrieved his sword and sliced off the right ears of the dead trolls—four in all. He packed the severed ears in a leather pouch filled

with deodorizing herbs and tied it tightly closed. It wasn't pleasant, but he needed them as proof of the suppression.

After that, he turned his steps toward the cave. He had to check to see if there were any parties in need of rescue or any other casualties, just in case. Alec used illumination magic to light the inside of the cave. Fortunately, there didn't seem to be any injured parties there.

His eyes went to a timeworn wooden box in a corner. There wasn't any cover, so its contents lay bare. Everything was slightly dirty, but the box was crammed with jewelry, precious metals, and coins. For some reason or another, trolls had a habit of collecting shiny things. These might be lost articles, spoils of battle, or even stolen goods. Alec had no way of knowing, but one thing that was certain was that the original owners had not been trolls. Some of the things might have been reported missing. He supposed he was going to have to take them back as confiscated items.

Alec packed them into a bag he carried with him and stood. All his blood drained downward, leaving him feeling sick. He swayed and pressed a hand to the rock wall to steady himself. This was bad. He needed to get back quickly.

As he walked back, he tried to keep his mind clear because every time he thought about how poorly he felt, it made him lose heart. He wanted to just sit down and not move any more. Toward the end, he even started to get a throbbing headache. Alec managed to keep walking on willpower alone.

His body felt heavy as he dragged it to the Guild. He pushed open the door and Zack looked over. His eyes widened, then his expression turned grim.

"Hey, don't tell me you got hurt somewhere."

Seeing the way Zack took the trouble to come out from behind the counter, Alec supposed he must really look terrible. He brought out the leather pouch with the trolls' ears in it for inspection and the bag of confiscated goods. Handing them over, he sighed.

"I'm just feeling a little unwell."

"Not just a little, judging by the color of your face. Want to have a lie-down in the rest area?"

Alec was grateful for his consideration, but he wanted to rest somewhere quiet. The Guild's rest area was one large room. He didn't like being conspicuous.

"No, I'd like to get back to my boarding house if I can. And sorry, but let's do the experience appraisal next time."

"Then, you want someone to see you home?" asked Zack, passing Alec his reward.

At first glance, Zack's speech and conduct made him seem rough, but the man was actually very kind and always looking after people. Alec could feel his worry around the edges of every word he said.

"I'm fine. Getting back to my lodgings shouldn't be a problem."

Sensing that this was likely to turn into a back-and-forth argument, Zack gave in with a sigh.

"Is that so? Well, maybe the fatigue of the trip is just setting in now. No need to push yourself. Just go rest up for now."

"I will."

Alec said goodbye and left the Guild. He'd said it wouldn't be a problem, but walking was incredibly tiresome. The distance to his lodgings, usually only a few minutes away, felt terribly far. He scolded his body, which felt like it would collapse if he lost focus, and managed to keep moving forward somehow. But after just a few moments, he couldn't endure any more and stopped in his tracks. He leaned against a building by the side of the road.

He took a few quick, deep breaths in an attempt to hold the severe discomfort of the fever and headache at bay, but it only made him feel worse. He didn't know what else to do. He should have rested at the Guild instead of being stubborn. Just when he was half-seriously considering simply sitting where he stood, he met the eye of a woman who had stopped in front of him.

"Alec?" Shiori looked like she was on her way back from shopping. When she saw him, her expression changed and she rushed over. "Are you all right? Your complexion isn't..."

She reached out with a hand, perhaps with the thought of supporting him. Alec grabbed hold of it and pulled her close, resting his head on her delicate shoulder. Maybe it was because he'd relaxed upon seeing a familiar face, but Alec's consciousness quickly grew distant.

He thought he heard Shiori call his name, but after that his memories were terribly vague.

2

Shiori left the general store and walked down the street in a very good mood. Her favorite shoulder bag was stuffed full of the spoils of war. She'd done some excellent shopping.

She'd bought better quality linens for camping, to replace her old ones. It was difficult to assemble a large quantity of her favorite Litoanyan linen, but her bath towels were of a famous domestic brand. And she'd changed from a plain weave to a waffle weave, which was outstanding in both feel and water absorbency. The dish cloths she'd bought were just a little bit stylish, with lines of colored thread along the edges. The lovely sundries lifted her mood.

And for her portable foods, she'd found some airtight containers made of lightweight metal and bought one to try it out. It should be easier to carry around than glass. If it proved easy to use, she planned to buy more.

She was having fun thinking about all these things as she headed for home. Then, just before she reached her apartment, she noticed someone leaning against a building and stopped. He stood there, unmoving, with his head down. It was a man in swordsman's dress, and Shiori thought she recognized him.

"Alec?"

The man slowly raised his head. His chestnut brown hair clung to his forehead with sweat, and his dark magenta eyes, which usually held a piercing light, were dull and vague. He couldn't seem to focus, and labored breaths puffed through his partly open lips. All the blood had drained from his face, leaving him ghastly pale. Shocked by his state, which was so clearly not normal, Shiori rushed over to him.

“Wha— Alec, are you all right?! Your complexion isn’t...”

She reached out to help steady him, and he pulled her close. It wasn’t an embrace. It would be more accurate to say that he was clinging to her for support. He rested his forehead on her shoulder. She could feel his breath hot against her neck, and his temperature was so high she could feel it even through their clothes.

“Alec, y— Oh!”

The body that clung to her suddenly turned into dead weight. Still leaning against the wall, he slowly slipped downward, and, unable to hold him up, Shiori dropped to her knees with him. From an outside point of view, they probably looked like two lovers, embracing each other. Ladies walking along the street seemed to say, “Oh my,” as they chuckled and passed by. But Shiori was in no position to notice. It was as much as she could do to escape from the circle of his arms.

Sweat sprang up on his skin, covering his whole face. Shiori reached out to touch it. It was hot. His breathing was horribly ragged. He looked as though he were in pain. She wanted to let him rest somewhere as quickly as possible, but he was a large man, and his body was so terribly heavy, it just wasn’t possible for Shiori to support him and walk. She found herself at a loss. Just then, Rurii, who had disappeared somewhere without her noticing, returned with the apartment caretaker.

“Miss Shiori! What’s happened?”

The caretaker was used to Rurii, so when he saw his tenant’s familiar appear alone and beckon to him with a tentacle, he was certain something must have happened to its master. He’d hurried out immediately. The caretaker, Lache, stared wide-eyed at the two of them. Realizing that something wasn’t right, he hurried over.

“This is the gentleman from the other day. Your...”

“Colleague from the Guild.”

Shiori noticed several passers-by stopping and staring, some with burning curiosity and others with worry. She couldn’t bear the thought of Alec

becoming a spectacle like this. Perhaps having the same thought, Lache changed his position so that his body blocked the onlookers' view of Alec.

Still, while she knew she wanted to let him rest somewhere, and soon, she didn't know where he lived. All she knew was that it was close. And given the state he was in, taking him to the Guild would be too difficult a distance for Alec.

Shiori made up her mind. He was a colleague. Companions looked after each other. It was their duty. And he'd helped her so much of late.

"I'm going to take him to my rooms. Will you help me?"

"Yes, of course. Let's carry him from either side."

"Thank you. Alec, I'm going to ask you to try just a little bit more."

Alec's eyes opened a tiny bit. He gave a small nod. Shiori and Lache supported him and got him on his feet. It must have been very painful for him because he nearly collapsed several times along the way. The other two encouraged him, and somehow they all made it to Shiori's apartment.

They sat him on the bed. His clothes were covered in dust and what seemed to be some kind of bodily fluids. Shiori reached out to remove them and stopped.

How do these come off? She didn't know how to remove his armor. Perhaps guessing Shiori's predicament, Lache came in with a helping hand.

"Allow me to do that. If you'd keep him upright, please."

They switched places, and Shiori supported Alec, who was still very limp. With a practiced manner, Lache removed Alec's epaulets and scabbard holder, and stood his sword beside the bed. Then he began to unfasten the straps of Alec's breastplate. Once all of his armor had been removed, a sigh slipped from Alec's mouth. Perhaps he felt a little more comfortable. Lache continued, removing his gloves and boots.

"I was once an adventurer too. A swordsman," he said.

"Were you really? That's a little unexpected."

"I'm sure it is. People often say that to me. I married early and changed

professions, you see, so I was only registered for a brief time. That must be why.”

Lache’s appearance and manner were so refined, he could easily pass as the butler of some noble house. There wasn’t a single trace of the man who’d once faced down magical beasts and brigands, wielding his sword out in the open air.

“Well, now that we’ve removed his equipment, I’ll leave the rest to you, if I may. I will go call for a doctor.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry for all the trouble.”

Shiori watched Lache hurriedly leave, then turned her gaze back to Alec. She wanted to rid him of his dirty clothes before he slept.

“You tell others not to push themselves too hard and then push yourself to this extent, I see.”

He must have undertaken a request in this state. The clothes under his cloak had fresh bloodstains on them. After a moment’s hesitation, she loosened the belt of his trousers, unbuttoned his shirt, and slipped both of his arms out of their sleeves. His scent—the scent of a man—flitted by her nose, and she blushed bright red as she caught a glance of his toned, naked upper body, covered in old scars. Then she pushed that awareness of him out of her mind.

“Alec, excuse me for just a moment.”

Once she’d said those words, she slipped her hand under his neck and managed to lift his upper body just a little. Quickly, she pulled his shirt away from him. His eyes remained closed, leaving himself completely at her mercy. It seemed he was already unconscious.

“I should wipe his face and body for him,” she murmured, taking up a lock of his dusty hair in her fingers.

Rurii moved up onto the bed and slipped Alec’s hand into its own translucent body. A little while later, when the slime pushed his hand back out, it was nice and clean. Apparently, the slime had absorbed just the dirt on the surface and nothing else.

“Amazing! You’re so talented! You can do things like that too? In that case, it

should be easy for his whole body... No, no. Hmm. Wait just a moment.”

Shiori couldn't help imagining Alec's entire body being licked clean by the slime, and the oddly indecent image left her troubled.

I think there are books with that kind of thing in them!

Inadvertently reminded of the risqué books meant for a certain type of enthusiast she'd seen in bookstores back in Japan, Shiori found herself with a sudden urge to run away from that spot. For the sake of Alec's honor, she felt it would probably be best if she wiped him down herself. When she asked Rurii to just do his hair, the slime jiggled with satisfaction, happy to have been asked a favor.

As Rurii got to work beside her, Shiori used magic to fill a washbasin with warm water. She dunked a towel in, then lightly wrung it out. She used it to gently wipe Alec's face and his pained expression eased a little. Shiori rinsed out the towel again, and after she'd wiped him from his neck to his waist, she pulled the comforter up to his shoulders. Quietly, she touched a hand to his brow. It was still hot. She soaked a clean towel in some water, used ice magic to freeze it just a little, then placed it on his forehead.

She gathered up his dirty clothes. After a moment's fretting, she steeled her will and slipped her hand under the lower half of the comforter.

I just need to not look, that's all.

She felt around under the comforter and when she found his trousers, she tugged a bit forcefully to pull them off. Then she breathed a sigh of relief. It couldn't have felt good to wear clothes dirtied with what were probably the bodily fluids of a magical beast.

Shiori put the trousers in a basket together with his shirt and coat. She remembered washing them on the manticore campaign, so it shouldn't cause any problems if she laundered them the same way she had then.

While she'd been doing this and that, Lache had returned with a doctor. The doctor checked Alec's fever and pulse, then examined the inside of his mouth as well as his eyes. After carefully inspecting Alec's whole body down to the tips of his fingers, the doctor raised his head and smiled.

“It seems likely this was brought on by exhaustion. Let him have a good long rest. Make sure he drinks water frequently, and if he has an appetite, feed him something nourishing that’s easily digested.”

Now that they knew it wasn’t some terrible illness, Lache and Shiori breathed a sigh of relief. They accepted the fever-reducing medicine the doctor had handed them with the instructions, “If it lingers, have him take these.” And after receiving a few more words of advice, they paid the doctor’s fees for his house call. As he was seeing the doctor down to the bottom of the stairs anyway, Lache said that he’d take his leave here as well, and bowed.

“Please let me know if anything happens.” So saying, he left with the doctor.

The room fell silent once more.

Shiori went back to the bed to check on Alec. His brows were still knit with discomfort, but his breathing seemed to have quieted a bit. Shiori drew the curtains near the bed to block the sunlight and make the room dimmer. She ripped out a page from her notebook and wrote a message on it. Then she filled a washbasin with water using her magic and gave it to Rurii, who was sitting at her feet.

“I’m sorry, can I ask you to run an errand for me? Once you’ve drunk this, I’d like you to take this note to my big brother.”

Rurii jiggled once, drank up all the water, then very carefully wrapped the note in its body. Shiori opened the door for the slime and it slipped out of the room.

“Right then.”

She’d gotten herself an urgent job. It was an emergency request to care for someone who had suddenly fallen ill. The first thing was to make some fruit water, and then some nourishing soup. She’d make things packed with nutrients so that if he woke up hungry, he’d be able to eat right away. Once she was done with that, she’d do the laundry.

Shiori rolled up her sleeves, threw on an apron, and got straight to work.

She’d start by making the fruit water for hydration. She used magic to create some clean water and boiled it, just to be safe. Then she brought it back to

room temperature straight away. Magic really was handy at times like this. She took jars of berry syrup, apples in honey, and ginger syrup off her shelf, then brought out salt. She dissolved a suitable amount of each one in the water she'd prepared.

Berry syrup had been made in Storydia since long ago. Many kinds of berries grew wild in the kingdom, and they'd served as a very important preserved food in the winter, when it was difficult to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables. Thanks to the preservation and transportation techniques developed during the previous king's reign, it was easier to get such things even in the winter, but berry syrup was still beloved as a traditional preserve.

Personally, Shiori would have liked to have some lemon, but citrus fruits were an import in Storydia and so very costly. It wasn't often that she could obtain them.

"I think that does it."

She poured the finished fruit water into a pitcher and set it aside.

Next was the soup. She would have liked to use mineral-rich white fish as the protein, but as she didn't have any on hand, she decided to go with chicken instead as it was low-fat and easily digestible. She diced tomato and onion, thinly sliced some green onion, and cut the chicken into small pieces. After heating some fruit oil in a pot, she tossed in the vegetables and chicken along with some grated ginger. She sautéed them quickly, added water, and brought it all to a boil. Her homemade freeze-dried carrots and celery went into the pot, and then she let it simmer. With a little salt and pepper for seasoning, it was done.

Shiori washed the dishes and cleansed her hands, then took the fruit water over to the small table that stood beside the bed. She checked to see how Alec was doing. The towel on his forehead was already warm. She rinsed it out in the washbasin, lightly wiped his face and body, then washed it again. After wringing it out, she used magic to freeze it lightly. She felt his forehead before replacing the towel. He was still terribly hot. It didn't seem like his fever would go down easily. Sweat was already starting to bead on his face even though she'd just wiped it for him. She mopped his sweat once more, and gently placed the cool

towel on his brow.

From time to time he stirred and cried out faintly as if in pain. He showed no signs of waking.

The state he's in, I think I should prepare myself to let him stay the night.

Many adventurers lived alone. When they were injured or fell ill and had to stay in bed with no one around to take care of them, it could be a very painful experience. At times like that, if they wanted, they could send a request through the Guild, and Shiori would be dispatched. Though, this was the first time she'd ever let the person she was nursing stay in her own home. And a single man at that.

I have the feeling big brother might have something to say to me about this.

Her overprotective, always-worrying older brother would definitely be bothered by this situation. She'd written about it in the note, so Shiori was certain that he'd drop by after work.

Despite everything, I don't think he'd do something like toss a sick person out.

With a strained laugh, Shiori headed into the bathroom to do the laundry. There wasn't much of a difference between the bloodstains of humans and magical beasts, so she managed to get them out by applying a little soap and scrubbing. After that, she made full use of her magic to finish the washing as she usually did. She hung everything on a rack in the bathroom and used wind magic to drive out the dampness. With the window open to let the breeze in, they'd dry soon enough.

Rurii, who had just returned, was floating in the bathtub, playing with the water. It appeared that the slime intended to keep doing that for a while longer. She told it to come out when it was done, and went to cleanse her hands.

As she took off her apron and folded it, she looked out the window.

Dusk approached, drawing an exquisite gradation across the sky, from the east where it had already turned a deep bluish magenta to the west where the mountain range had been dyed a warm madder red. Far overhead, the stars had begun to twinkle. The sun was setting earlier and earlier. Winter was

approaching.

Knock knock.

There was a knock at the door. Shiori quietly drew closer and heard a familiar voice say, "It's me." She unlocked the door and opened it. A man with hair the same color as the sunset she'd just been looking at poked his head inside.

"Hey. I came to see how things are going."

"Big brother, that was quick."

"I wrapped things up early to come here. I was worried."

Zack handed Shiori a paper bag he'd brought with him and walked over to the bed. He peered down at Alec, who was still asleep. Then, gently pressing the palm of his hand to Alec's cheek, he seemed to deliberate about something. After another moment, he heaved a deep sigh.

"I was planning to take him home, but with this fever, that's not going to work."

It appeared he really had intended to take Alec away. Shiori smiled wryly.

"I feel bad for him. Even bringing him to my place was really hard on him. Just let him sleep here."

After a pause, Zack agreed. "All right."

He didn't seem entirely pleased, but he'd apparently resigned himself to it. With a sidelong glance at Zack, who'd lowered himself onto a stool beside the bed, Shiori took the towel from Alec's head, moistened it in the washbasin, and wrung it out. He was sweating so much in his sleep. Shiori was a little worried. She wondered if she should wake him once and have him drink some water.

"He used to get fevers all the time as a kid...but I haven't seen him laid up like this in a long time." The words fell quietly from Zack's lips.

When they'd first been introduced, Shiori had heard they were old friends, but she'd never imagined that they'd known each other for that long.

"You're childhood friends?"

"Not quite. I first met this guy when he was about to turn ten or so, but I

reached the age of adulthood and left soon after that. We didn't really spend any time together until after he came of age and became an adventurer."

"Really..."

"When he was starting out, he didn't know his limits so he was always doing crazy things and ending up confined to bed like this, but even that only lasted about a year. Around the time his body finished developing, it had pretty much stopped happening." Zack seemed nostalgic as he looked down at Alec.

Since Shiori had met Zack and Alec after they'd become full-fledged adventurers, that's all she knew of them. It felt strange to think that the two men had gone through times like those. She wondered what they'd been like as youths.

"You interested? I've got stories about me and this guy when we were young," Zack said jokingly. Shiori could only give a wry smile in return.

"I am interested, but...that's forbidden, isn't it? Adventurers aren't allowed to pry into each other's pasts."

There were some people who had become adventurers out of pure admiration for the profession, but a lot of people had special circumstances. Criminals were, of course, out of the question, but otherwise it was a position to which anyone could be appointed so long as they passed the written examination and the interview. Perhaps that was the reason highly born people, like noble sons who couldn't succeed their houses or noble daughters who couldn't find marriage partners, hid their identities and chose the path of an adventurer. There were a surprisingly large number of people like this. Shiori had even heard that among them were nobles who couldn't remain with their houses because of some misconduct they'd committed.

That's why everyone preferred not to delve into each other's pasts. "Don't bring up your companions' backgrounds." It was an unwritten rule amongst adventurers. And Shiori herself knew that she'd be in a bind if anyone ever asked her. Honestly, she didn't know how she'd answer because she had no explanation.

And who would ever expect a reply like, "I came from another world."

“It’s nothing so dramatic. And when people offer to tell you themselves, it shouldn’t cause any problems.” Zack’s red hair shook as he laughed. “That said, my past isn’t a big deal. I was illegitimate. My dad took me in and raised me, but people wouldn’t stop talking and making a fuss, so it wasn’t a comfortable place to be. I left. My relationship with my family isn’t too bad, but...well, you just can’t help these things. And this guy, he’s sort of the same.”



“I’d say that past qualifies as ‘a big deal.’”

An illegitimate child. People making a fuss.

Shiori could imagine what might have been said to him. In this kingdom, people came of age at sixteen, but they were really still young enough to be called children. It must have been difficult to experience that at such an impressionable time in his life. And...

He was probably born to a well-to-do family.

Maybe it was because of the way he spoke, but Zack could seem a little rough when you first met him. And yet, there was a refinement to his behavior and bearing that was sophisticated. One example of this was the beautiful way he carried himself while he ate. Shiori had also heard that while he’d been an adventurer, he’d often worked with the nobility.

Now knowing that Zack had kept company with Alec when they were children, it made Shiori wonder if Alec might also be...

“People are not expendable tools created for the use of the nobility!”

That was the statement he’d made to the people of the count’s house. She’d felt that they weren’t words that someone brought up in an average environment might say.

“Ngh...” Alec’s moan snapped Shiori back to the present.

She looked at him, checking his condition, but he hadn’t woken up and showed no signs of doing so. Shiori and Zack sighed.

“Sorry to ask, but let me stay here too. I’ll look after this guy.”

“Of course. We can tend to him in turns. Since he’s asleep, would you like to eat?”

“Yeah. Sorry about all this. There’s bread and apples in the paper bag I gave you earlier. Could you bring them out for me?”

Zack’s apologizing for Alec gave Shiori the feeling that they weren’t simply old friends. Having grown up in similar circumstances, they were more like brothers.

I think I'm a little jealous.

It had already been four years, but at the same time, it had only been four years. Here in this world with no friends, no family, no personal history, and nothing to show her roots, Shiori felt her own existence to be terribly vague and ambiguous. So she was painfully envious of these two men who had all of that.

If she spent more time in this world, could those things—a reason to keep living, connections to others, and a place to belong—be hers too? Should she make them for herself? She and her indeterminate standing...

"If you so wished it, I would be that place for you, a place where you belong."

That's what Alec had said to her once. He was such a kind person, and he looked out for her in so many ways. But she couldn't tell if his words reflected what he truly felt, nor if she could take the hand he held out to her with no conditions attached.

Many people had been just as considerate of her. Among them there had been, of course, men who'd approached and whispered words to make her believe that they cared. But when they didn't try to close the distance between them any further, Shiori simply assumed that the men of this kingdom must often give polite, empty compliments of that sort. It made her all the more self-conscious of how different her position was from that of others.

I want you. I need you. He'd said those words to her so many times, and he'd treated her as a sweetheart might. But he'd never whispered the most important words, those of love, to her before he'd abandoned her to die in a labyrinth. And no matter what she did, she wasn't able to forget his existence. She'd been made to realize that, in the end, that was all she was worth.

And that was how she'd become such a terrible coward about taking the hands that offered her help. If she were ever told she wasn't needed as she had been back then, she didn't think she'd be able to recover. Though she knew that there weren't many as fatuous as that man, and that actually most people were really very good, it only made her more afraid.

But Alec had said he'd be a place where she belonged. He'd embraced her.

"Let's head back." And the hand that had held hers then—his hand—had

been so warm and gentle.

Now that hand was horribly hot and covered in sweat. Shiori reached out quietly to touch it.

She still didn't know Alec's true motives, but the span of time she'd spent with him, walking together, pulled along by his hand, had been peaceful. It had felt good. His hands, the warm gentleness of them, felt like they anchored her vague existence to this place.

"Get better soon," she said, patting his fevered hand. Then she left his bedside to prepare a meal.

She didn't notice Zack observing her from behind.

3

Alec was dreaming, and it could in no way be considered a pleasant one. The dream was of the Empire, and of the three years total he'd lived there.

"I'd thought you were plain, but when I look more closely, your face is quite beautiful, Allen."

The words had been spoken by a young lady who'd scattered a strong scent of perfume about her. She was beautiful, but her makeup likely played a large part in that. As she leaned coquettishly against him, her face powder looked chalky and out of place.

"I'm honored, my lady."

He wasn't happy, but he hid it skillfully and gave her a broad smile. He'd investigated her preferences thoroughly, so he was very well-versed in them—handsome, knowing features coupled with a lazy elegance of bearing, and just a hint of a rake's manner. When he'd tried acting in keeping with her taste, she'd fallen all too quickly. He brushed his fingertips suggestively against her lips, and her still childish face smiled up at him sweetly.

"All right. I'll ask my father if he'll take you on as a special favor."

The young woman who had brought him into her house found that he met all of her preferences perfectly and treated her as if she were a princess. She was

soon completely devoted to him. And her father, too, gradually came to value him for his diligence and the excellence of his work, which was so at odds with his frivolous demeanor.

The father was a wealthy merchant who sold items such as personal armor and horse tack to the Imperial army. As Allen, Alec had become the man's close associate and likely successor, and been entrusted with important business dealings. Through them, he had learned details of the Imperial army's deployment, scope, and marching plans.

Having come this far, Alec's mission was nearly complete. All he needed to do was pass the information to comrades who had infiltrated the Empire, and wait for them to incite the rebel army.

Once that was done, then...

"Allen! Allen! Where are you?!"

As the rebel army approached to set the mansion ablaze, the young woman had called out for him. But he didn't look back. He was not Allen. There was no Allen. The man known as Allen Schrigeena, the son of a lord of a rural area in the remote regions of the Empire, had never existed in the first place. The person who did exist was Alec Dia—a spy under the direct supervision of the sovereign of Storydia.

Now he could finally go home.

He would travel from the Empire—filthy as it was with discrimination, corruption, and exploitation—and return to his native land, a place of kindness and peace.

Feeling suddenly as though someone had called his name, Alec's consciousness slowly surfaced. His thoughts felt fuzzy, covered in haze, and it was impossible to focus on anything. He began to doze off. Then, eyes still closed, he sensed a few presences nearby and his consciousness instantly revived.

When did I allow them to get so close?

Had he slept so deeply he hadn't noticed them approaching? He'd been

careless. Inside, he gnashed his teeth in frustration. He tried to move, and that's when he noticed. His body was hot and heavy. His joints grated. Had he been drugged? He'd really messed up. Moving his arm beneath the comforter, he searched under his pillow. But the dagger he always kept hidden there while he slept was gone.

Blast.

It would be difficult to take on several enemies at once unarmed, and with a body he couldn't move freely. But he had no choice. He had to try. Alec focused his awareness in his dominant hand. If he aimed to unleash his magic at the moment of contact, at the very least, one would definitely be—

“Alec! This isn't the Empire! Quit it with all that bloodlust!”

Shocked by the voice that suddenly called out to him, Alec quickly realized that it was familiar. When he recognized the man's voice, his body, which had been ready for battle, relaxed completely.

“Are you all right? You were moaning in your sleep quite a bit.”

Alec knew he'd been dreaming of something unpleasant, but he couldn't really remember what.

Zack moved the towel on Alec's forehead aside and replaced it with the palm of his hand.

“Still hasn't gone down.” Zack sighed and rinsed the towel in a nearby washbasin.

Alec watched him out of the corner of his eye as he fuzzily cast a glance at his surroundings. A dimmed magic lantern cast a faint illumination over the unfamiliar room. No, wait.

“Is this...Shiori's room?”

“When you collapsed, she carried you here. You don't remember?”

Once Zack had told him that, Alec tried to think back, but his memories were vague. He was sure he'd left the Guild, and then Shiori...

Having thought that far, Alec realized that he was occupying her bed.

“Where is Shiori?”

“Sleeping on the sofa. We just changed shifts.”

Alec glanced over and saw Shiori curled up, wrapped in a blanket, asleep.

“Listen up. Bring your fever down by tomorrow and get out of here.”

It seemed Zack really didn’t like having an unmarried man sleeping in his little sister’s bed.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

It would be good if his fever subsided after a night’s rest, but this felt different to Alec than it usually did when he was in bad shape. When he was young he’d wrecked his health pretty badly, and this felt closer to that.

Feeling thirsty, he slowly sat up. The grating in his joints and dull pain in his head made him groan. He was presented with a glass full of water, which he put to his lips. There was the faint impression of an aroma, a touch of sweetness and acidity—it was fruit water.

“She said she went out of her way to make this for you. Drink it with gratitude.”

Shiori’s thoughtfulness filled Alec’s heart as he drained his cup of the fruit water. He felt the moisture permeate his dehydrated body and sighed with relief.

“You don’t have to sleep with your nerves on edge anymore. Don’t worry, just rest up.”

Alec made a quiet sound of assent.

He lay down as he’d been told and was instantly assailed by sleepiness. Alec closed his eyes. A cold towel was placed on his forehead, then Zack ruffled his hair. He remembered being taken care of like this long, long ago, when he’d still been a boy. And in those times, he remembered having his head patted like that, the way everyone does with children.

I’m not a child anymore though, he thought, caught up in nostalgia, and slipped once more into the depths of sleep.

The next time he opened his eyes, it was already bright outside. He could hear the sounds of carts passing by outside the window. Apparently, it was time for people to be up and about.

His head was still fuzzy and everything was hazy, as though covered in mist. And his body was hot.

“It’s still high...” Zack grumbled the words with a sour expression, his hand pressed to Alec’s forehead. Shiori looked on with a strained smile.

After a moment, Alec spoke in a penitent tone. “I’m sorry.”

It had been a long time since he’d had a fever that didn’t subside even after a night’s sleep. His voice sounded pathetic even to himself.

“Please don’t let it bother you,” said Shiori. “I don’t mind. Just get some rest.”

Alec was grateful for her consideration. Still, he felt as awkward as one might expect about staying in an unmarried woman’s home for two days. He couldn’t shake off the sluggishness of his body, but he managed to sit up. She gently supported his back and handed him a glass of water.

“If you’d stay here, it would make it easier for me to care for you. Please take your time and rest.”

“But that means you’d have a bachelor in your rooms for two days!”

Zack protested vehemently, but Shiori simply smiled sweetly at him. Her smile seemed somehow threatening. Alec wondered if he were just imagining it.

“I think it would be far better than someone who burst in dead drunk and ended up staying for two days due to a hangover.”

Zack made a choking noise in his throat.

Apparently, Shiori was speaking about him. Zack groaned at the unexpected counteroffensive. Finding the sight of them amusing, Alec laughed a little, finished his water, and lay down again. Someone pulled the comforter up over his shoulders and placed a chilled towel on his forehead. The cold felt nice.

“Thanks. Sorry for causing all this trouble.”

“Not at all,” Shiori replied. “I’m sure your body is just telling you to rest.

Please don't push yourself too hard."

Those were the same words he was always telling Shiori. All he could do was smile wryly.

Alec closed his eyes. He'd thought he'd already slept for quite a long time, but drowsiness quickly overtook him once more. It must mean that his body really was demanding rest.

Shiori's soft hand gently patted his own rugged, clumsy one, the way she might a small child's.

Now that I think about it, my mother patted my hand like this too.

When he'd been a young boy and he couldn't fall asleep, she had taken his hand and gripped it gently.

It couldn't be said that they'd been well-off in any way, but his memories of living together with his gentle mother were precious to him even now.

"Mother."

The word that had sprung to his lips from a deep sense of nostalgia... Had he whispered it in his heart, or said it aloud? With even that fact still fuzzy, Alec relinquished his consciousness.

When he woke for the third time, it was a little before noon. Zack had gone to work. Shiori handed Alec a note Zack had left for him. He opened it to find a single sentence written in a hasty scrawl—*Don't you dare make a move on her, even by accident.*

"I don't lack in honor so much that I'd try my hand in this sort of situation, you know." Alec gave a strained smile and Shiori cocked her head to the side, puzzled. He told her it was nothing and tried sitting up.

He felt a little better, but there was still an uncomfortable pain in his joints. And his head felt heavy. He'd thought he'd kept himself healthy and strong, so the fact that he was recovering so poorly made him feel depressed.

"Are you hungry?"

He had no appetite. Alec shook his head.

“Then let’s take some of these fever reducers, shall we?”

She handed him water and medicine, and he drank them down as he’d been told. Then he burrowed back under the comforter.

After that, he slept and woke again several times. And perhaps because of the fever, every time he slept, he had dreams with no seeming coherence. Memories from when he was very young. Things that had happened very recently.

...and dreams of things he didn’t want to remember.

“Starting today, you will be living here. See that you make every effort so as not to bring shame on your standing.”

The words his father had spoken to him had been terribly cold ones to give to a son who had only just turned nine. Feeling as though he might be crushed under his fears and anxiety, he’d looked around, seeking help. But the eyes of the adults staring down at him had not been those of allies. They’d seemed to ridicule him, to look down on him, to find the whole thing amusing...

Mother, help me. Don’t leave me.

But she wasn’t there to protect him any more. The mother who had raised him all on her own had died. She had fallen ill, perhaps from overwork, and had left this world very suddenly.

His father wasn’t there. He’d known that his father was alive, but couldn’t live with them. That’s why, ever since he’d been born, it had just been the two of them, him and his mother. So then, why now, after all this time?

He’d wished he’d had a father many times. When he saw friends he’d been playing with go home with the fathers who’d come to pick them up... Or when he caught sight of children laughing, carried atop their fathers’ shoulders... How many times in those moments had he wished he’d had a father too?

But this wasn’t what he’d wished for. Didn’t fathers look more fondly at their sons? Then why was this man looking at him like he was a stranger? He spoke such cold words with that distant expression. And in spite of it, he was saying,

“Starting today, this is your home”?

The adults surrounding him stared down at him with such cold eyes, staring, staring, staring...

Beautiful girls laughed and chattered.

The scent of perfume. The smell of makeup. So many scents mingled and mixed, and the horrible smell made him feel sick.

“Your Highness, I am holding a tea party in the rose garden at my home on our next holiday. You will come, won’t you?”

“Oh, now I will not allow you to try to get ahead of everyone like that. Your Highness, won’t you please spend some time with me?”

Your Highness. Your Highness. They crowded around as if chasing him down. The girls looked up at him with heated gazes, but they didn’t see him. All they saw was his title—Your Highness.

Ah, but she alone was...

“Your Highness, I am here beside you. So if you wish to cry, please cry.”

She was the lowest ranked and least conspicuous of all the noble daughters who frequented the palace. But she was kind, living up to her simple, artless appearance. She had noticed that his nerves had been worn to shreds, unaccustomed as he was to life in the palace, and had approached him gently, as if nestling beside him. When he had wept pathetically, she had soothed him.

He had loved her. And he’d believed that she had felt the same.

But...

Cold eyes. They looked down on him and he trembled. *Why? Why are you looking at me that way?*

He’d known that if he left the palace, he wouldn’t be able to marry the daughter of a viscount. But even so, he’d thought they had an understanding of the heart. That’s what he’d believed.

“Don’t misunderstand me. If you renounced your right to succession and cast

aside your royal standing, what worth could you possibly have left?"

With that, his very first love came to a cruel and tragic end.

"I'm truly sorry. Please forgive me for going off and leaving you here alone."

The words trembled around the edges. He must have noticed. But even if he had noticed, he'd probably let it pass unremarked because he was such a kind younger brother.

"It's fine. Don't let it bother you. I'm the one who's sorry. If I were stronger, you'd never have been called here. And now I've gotten you caught up in this conflict over the succession."

He really was kind, speaking as though he were responsible for everything.

"But an adventurer, you say? You'll see more battle than even the knights do. I'll be worried for you."

"Lord Bleyzac will be with me until I can stand on my own. I'll be fine."

His little brother frowned uneasily out of concern for him. When Alec clapped him on the shoulder, he replied quietly, *"I suppose that's true."*

"Stay well, and send me a letter once in a while. If you ever feel so inclined, a visit from you would make me even happier."

Alec hesitated before answering. *"I don't mind sending letters, but coming to visit might be difficult. Still, if you're ever in a terrible bind, get in touch. I will always come running."*

"Thanks. But I'll do my best too. I'll work hard and make this a place you'll feel comfortable in, you'll see. When I do, then come back home. And make sure you become a splendid adventurer."

"I will. That's a promise."

"A promise." He held out his fist.

Alec lightly bumped his own against it. Under his blond hair, his brother's deep magenta eyes—eyes that were the sole proof they were siblings as they didn't look much alike—met Alec's gaze with his own.

Though they had only spent a few years with each other, they were like twins that had lived together since birth, like unequalled best of friends. That was the relationship he shared with his younger brother. They were related by blood and each other's only siblings. His younger brother, born in the same year as himself.

"Then, I'll see you later."

"Yes. Later."

He wouldn't say goodbye. They'd see each other again. So promising, he left.

The dead eyes of a slave transported in a cage affixed to a crude horse-drawn cart... The slave's figure glimpsed through the cage was so blackened with filth that the word "dirty" was too simple an expression. As he passed by, an offensive smell assailed his nose. Their treatment was entirely that of criminal slaves, but he feared it was likely that proper procedures had not been followed. He could see young women and small children among the slaves. They'd probably been abducted illegally, but that was common in the Empire.

Just then, a child in the cage, who had been expressionless up to that point, suddenly snapped back to the present and began to cry. Several of the other slaves looked toward the child, some with heartbroken gazes and others with grim ones. But most of them just sat there, unmoving, as if they didn't feel anything.

"Silence! Be quiet!"

The slave trader took up a rod and thrust it into the cage, churning it violently.

There was a shrill scream. The horrible smell grew stronger.

Oh, stop. Please stop.

It made him want to cover his ears. He felt as though he were going to be sick, but he desperately shoved the nausea down and feigned an uncaring appearance. In this moment, he was a noble of the Empire. He mustn't react. Just let it go in one ear and out the other. And, even by mistake, he must never do anything like try to help.

Each time he fell asleep he dreamed. The dreams began suddenly, without context or logic, and they snapped midway, breaking off like being yanked out of an absorbing book and leaving it half-read. He felt like there were some good dreams, but most of them were nightmares. It must have been because the fever had weakened him.

But every time he cried out because of a nightmare, Shiori would wake him. She'd take his hand, stroke his head, and gently whisper that everything was all right. Relieved, he'd fall back asleep.

"Not being alone...is nice."

He'd spoken the words while nodding off, and he thought that Shiori had smiled faintly. She held his hand with one of hers, and with the other, softly stroked his hair.

"I'll be right beside you."

He asked, "Will you...really?"

She might have meant the words as simple reassurance. But he couldn't help clinging to her presence beside him, to that single phrase. Oh, he must have grown very weak after all.

"Yes. That's why it's all right. Don't worry."

Alec made a quiet sound of assent.

The hand that had been touching his hair traced along the edge of his ear and slipped down to his face. A soft hand gently touched his cheek. Reassured by the warmth of it, he was drawn back down into slumber.

This time he was certain he wouldn't have any more nightmares.

And that was because this kind person was by his side.

Sensing a brightness behind his eyelids, Alec opened his eyes.

Soft light filtered through a gap in the drawn curtains. It was morning. He had an inkling he'd ended up sleeping for a very long time, but he felt good.

With a sense of regret that the warmth which had held his hand so tightly

wasn't there, he looked around the room. He jerked back with surprise at finding Rurii sitting plopped right beside his pillow. It had probably been peering down at him. Seeing it this close up, it was quite large.

Rurii gave a jelly-like shake, then extended a part of its body in a sort of tentacle. Alec had seen this—Rurii's version of a greeting—before. The fact that the slime was playing the fool made Alec somehow feel as if his strength was draining from him.

"Morning." Alec returned the greeting and Rurii shook approvingly. Then the slime bounced and jumped off the bed. Perhaps having caught Alec's voice, Shiori appeared in the bedroom already dressed for the morning.

"Good morning. How are you feeling?"

She approached as she spoke and put a hand to his forehead without waiting for an answer.

"I'm so glad. It's come down quite a bit. And your color looks better. I'd say you only have a slight fever now."

The hand that had pressed against his forehead moved without any hesitation to his cheek and even the base of his neck to check his temperature. Maybe through two nights of nursing, she'd completely lost any sense of resistance toward him.

That may be something to be happy about, but the reason for it is a little pathetic.

He was delighted that the distance between them had shortened, but he'd ended up causing her quite a lot of trouble. Feeling both embarrassed and awkward about that, he tried to sit up. She supported his back. Then he realized he was hungry.

Shiori seemed to have guessed that because she asked, "Would you like to eat something?"

Alec nodded.

"Then I'll bring you something light."

She placed a cushion behind his back to help him sit in a comfortable position,

and draped a wine-colored shawl over his shoulders so that he wouldn't get cold. A fresh, faintly sweet fragrance wafted up and tickled his nose. It was Shiori's scent, which deeply permeated the shawl.

She pulled back the window curtains to let the soft autumn sunlight into the room, and headed toward the kitchen. Alec fuzzily watched her figure from behind as she worked skillfully and efficiently. While he was doing that, she finished her preparations. Shiori brought over a tray carrying a dish with a high rim. There were root vegetables and chicken which had been diced and simmered into an amber-colored soup.

"If you can't eat it all, please just leave it. You don't have to force yourself to finish everything."

"Don't worry. I can eat this." As he took up the spoon, he suddenly realized something. "Now that I think about it, where's Zack?"

Alec hadn't seen him since he woke up. Maybe Zack had come by while he was still asleep and then gone back to work.

"A difficult matter came in yesterday, so he, Clemens, and Nadia have gone together to take care of it. He sent word that they'd be back today." Shiori handed Alec a note that had been left on the table. It was from Zack. "He wrote this and left it for you yesterday. He must be very worried about you, Alec."

"No, I don't think that's it."

Shiori seemed to have gotten the wrong impression, but Alec knew his own thinking was likely right. He unfolded the note and, just as he'd thought, saw a brief message written in a hasty scrawl: *Listen up. Even if your fever goes down, you just stay quiet and sleep. Don't you dare make a move on her, even by accident.*

He knew that Zack was worried for Shiori, but just how untrustworthy did he think Alec was? All Alec could do was smile wryly at Zack's overprotective attitude toward the woman he considered his younger sister. He refolded the note, placed it beside his pillow, and turned back to his soup.

"Thank you for this."

"Please have some."

He used the spoon to scoop up vegetables and chicken along with some broth and brought them to his mouth. A mild saltiness and a deep, wholesome savoriness from the root vegetables gave it a nourishing flavor that spread through his mouth and seeped right into him.

“It’s good.”

“I’m glad.”

The meat and vegetables crumbled lightly at the slightest pressure from his tongue, melting away. They must have been simmered for a long time to make them tender so as not to shock his stomach while he recovered.

“You made this for me?”

Shiori nodded in reply. Even as Alec savored the feeling of his heart filling with warmth, his spoon kept moving. Perhaps thinking that it might be difficult to eat while being watched, Shiori tactfully moved to leave. But that action made Alec feel lonely, and words to stop her flew from his mouth.

“Stay...”

“I’m sorry?”

Alec hesitated. “Please stay with me.”

Shiori seemed a little surprised, but she quickly gave him a quiet smile. Yes, that was it. That smile. Her tender smile was like sunlight filtering through the trees, blocking out the harsh rays of the sun and bestowing only a gentle warmth. It quietly healed his heart, worn to tatters after such long missions, of all the hurts that had built up.

“Then I’ll eat with you. Wait just a moment.”

Shiori returned to the kitchen, ladled soup into two more deep dishes, placed them on a tray, and brought them out. She placed one in front of Rurii, then sat on a stool beside the bed.

“Thank you for this meal.” She put her hands together and bowed a little before she touched her food. It seemed to be etiquette from her native land which was followed prior to eating.

Warm rays of sunlight filtered into the room where the clicking of spoons

against plates was the only sound. The time passed pleasantly even without conversation.

Shiori looked relieved when she saw his empty plate.

“I’m so glad. If your appetite’s returned, then you must be all right.”

“I ended up completely dependent on your care. I’m sor— No. Thank you.”

He didn’t want to leave, but he couldn’t put her to any more trouble. When he told her he planned to go home, she removed the shawl that had been draped over his shoulders and replaced it with a blanket which she spread out and wrapped around him as if to hide his nakedness.

“If you’d like, please use the bath before you go. With only a slight fever, it should be all right. It will be more difficult if you wait until after you get home, won’t it?”

“Really, I couldn’t possibly...”

“...impose that far” was how he meant to end the sentence, but at that moment the smell of his own body tickled his nose. He vaguely recalled them wiping away his perspiration as he slept, but the smell of sweat and the stickiness of his skin probably wouldn’t go away without a good bath. And his hair was getting oily too. Once he got back to the boarding house, he’d have to ask the proprietress to boil some water for him.

In that moment of hesitation, Shiori had disappeared into the bathroom. Before long, she returned. She must have gone to fill the bath with hot water using her magic.

“I’ve put towels and clothes in there. Use the soap and whatever else however you like.”

After another moment, Alec spoke. “Thanks. I’m really sorry about everything.”

“Not at all. Please don’t let it bother you.”

He decided to quietly impose on Shiori’s kindness. In that moment, he realized for the first time that she must have removed his soiled clothes while he’d slept and seen his ugly, scar-covered body. The fact that she hadn’t

mentioned it at all showed how considerate she was.

Alec pushed aside the comforter and carefully rose from the bed as Shiori encouraged him. The discomfort that had come from his illness was gone.

“Hot water wouldn’t be good for your body right now, so I’ve made it on the lukewarm side. Please soak for as long as you like.” So saying, she gently closed the bathroom door and left.

Alec saw that his own clothes had been washed, folded, and left on the table beside the bathtub along with some towels. He touched the water in the bath. It wasn’t too hot and it wasn’t too mild. The temperature had been calibrated with consideration for the state of his health.

Shiori’s kindness seeped into him, touching him so deeply his heart hurt.

“What am I supposed to do with this...?”

Perhaps he was still weak.

But honestly... He was exasperated with himself.

He’d fallen so completely for that woman there was no turning back.

After he’d finished his bath, Shiori urged him to sit in a chair and pressed a cup of a warm medicinal tisane into his hands. As he sipped it, she dried his hair so that he wouldn’t get chilled. The warmth of her magic and the feel of her slender fingers slipping through his chestnut brown hair felt so nice that his eyes half closed in enjoyment.

Once that happy, but brief, span of time had passed, all that was left was for Alec to return home. Shiori had picked out several of her preserved foods that were both nutritious and easy to digest, and bundled them together into a tightly packed parcel. She handed it to him and told him not to let himself get chilled as she wrapped a shawl the dark teal of ducks’ feathers around his shoulders.

“Your fever might only have gone down because of the medicine. It would be terrible if it came back, so please take some time off of work. And absolutely do

not push yourself too hard.”

“I won’t. Really, you’ve taken such good care of me, of everything. Thank you.”

Shiori offered to see him all the way to his lodgings, but he politely declined. He turned back to face her from the doorway.

“Shiori?”

“Yes?”

Alec reached out with his free hand to gently touch her face, cupping her cheek with his palm.

“Before, I told you that I’d become a place for you, a place you belonged, but...”

He leaned in and lightly dropped a gentle kiss on her soft lips. For a moment, her flowing black hair mingled with his own chestnut brown hair, sharing the scent of the shampoo he’d borrowed from her. Then he stepped back.

“...you ended up becoming the place I belong first.”

Before reluctantly pulling his hand away, he caressed her cheek lovingly once more. Then, Alec put the place behind him.

After leaving the apartment, Alec had planned to head straight to his lodgings, but he changed his mind and turned his steps toward the Guild. He wondered if Zack had returned. He felt as though Zack had been quite vigilant about a lot of things, but it was also true that he’d caused him both worry and trouble. Alec needed to give him an apology and thanks, as well as tell him that he’d be taking a few days to recover.

When he opened the door of the Guild, he found Zack in the middle of disarming as if he’d only just returned. Clemens and Nadia, who were both with Zack, looked toward him. Zack turned and looked too. The eyes of all three widened slightly.

“I heard you’d collapsed,” said Nadia. “Are you better already?”

“Yes, but I’m planning to stay quiet for two or three days. Sorry for leaving

such a hole.”

Zack paused before replying. “No, it’s fine. And I’m sorry. I should have noticed. Make sure you completely rest up.”

“I will. Thanks.”

They watched Alec as he left the Guild.

“Well, that was surprising. I didn’t realize he could smile with such a gentle expression. I’ve never seen it before.” Nadia appeared deeply moved as she murmured the words.

“Yeah.” Zack could only agree. “And the look on his face... He seemed pretty satisfied.”

From the moment they’d first met as children to this very day, Zack had never once seen Alec with that expression, as though he were completely content from the bottom of his heart.

Shiori must have softened him.

When Alec had turned away, for a moment a familiar sweet scent had wafted from his chestnut hair. Realizing what it must mean, he clapped Clemens, who had bitten his lip and dropped his gaze, on the shoulder and watched Alec walk out the door.

If Shiori has become a place where you belong, then this time it’s your turn, Alec. Become a place where she feels free to be herself.

He recalled the way Shiori had looked when she first began to show that her heart might have gone to Alec. Fevered, Alec had moaned from a nightmare, and Shiori had gently touched his hand. Zack wondered if she herself realized. Did she know how lovingly she had looked at him in that moment?

Take good care of her, Aleksey.

Clemens seemed to have accepted his defeat in something. Seeing him so depressed, something which was unusual for him, Zack smiled wryly and exchanged a glance with Nadia.

“Looks like we’re just going to have to keep you company while you drown

your cares in drink tonight.”

Even after Alec had slowly descended the stairs, and she’d heard him speak with someone on the lower floor... After his footsteps had left the apartment building and faded into the distance... Shiori stood there, completely still, her fingertips gently pressed to her lips where something warm had brushed against them.

Alec had given her a smile that had made her feel as though she would melt. She remembered the way his deep magenta eyes had sweetly narrowed, the gentle arc of his lips—the feel of them on hers.

As she comprehended the exact nature of what had just happened to her, and the truth of it slowly seeped into her brain, she realized that her face had gone bright red.

“I’d thought that he was just saying those things to be polite since people from other countries are so forward, but...” The words fell quietly from Shiori’s mouth. “I think he might have meant it.”

Rurii stared up at her as if to say, “You only just realized that?”

4

His magic sword flashed as it rent the air with a *whoosh. Shing, shing*. A sound like thin glass shattering rang out and the rainbowed ants that crowded around in a semicircle were split cleanly in two. Cut in half, the front and back halves of the ants wriggled for a while, but soon they breathed their last.

Alec searched for nearby presences and confirmed that none had slipped by him. There didn’t seem to be any problems.

He sheathed his sword and looked at the palms of his hands, then he tried taking a deep breath. Nothing felt wrong anywhere. He was fine. His health had completely recovered.

After falling into an unconscious state from fever for two days, he’d taken two days to rest just to be safe. He’d felt completely recovered after that, but then he’d received some very gracious words from the guild master—“Rest another

three days, idiot.” He’d ended up not working for a whole week. Today, he’d finally received permission to return to the field.

He’d been recommended this job as a relatively easy one to get his body used to things again—collecting the outer skins of rainbowed ants. Just as their name suggested, the outer skins of rainbowed ants were made of a thin, glassy membrane that shone beautifully in rainbow colors. It was highly prized as a material for crafting glasswork, perfume bottles, and jewelry. Rainbowed ants weren’t particularly difficult to subdue, but as it was necessary to damage the outer skins as little as possible in the process, and the other magical beasts in the area could prove troublesome, the difficulty level of the request had been set high.

He carefully wrapped each of the ants in the bags he’d been given. The bags had been made specifically to preserve them. He then wrapped them once more in cushioning and packed them into his knapsack. All that was left was to give them to the client.

“Huh?”

As he looked around to make sure he hadn’t missed any, Alec caught sight of something shining at his feet and dropped to one knee. Whatever it was, it had been half-buried in fallen leaves. He picked it up and it glittered, reflecting the sunlight. It was a fragment of stone, a warm deep violet tinged with blue.

He looked at it a moment. “A natural magic stone?”

Rainbowed ants were capable of storing magical essences under their outer skin. They had probably crystallized into this. And the clear, mysterious shade of purple might have come from the rainbowed ants’ favorite food, snow violets.

Crystals like this one could sometimes be found around magical beasts that had the ability to store magical essences. Larger ones could be used in magical tools or weapons, or as the raw materials for man-made magic stones. Smaller ones were treated like semi-precious stones.

This stone was very small, only the size of a fingertip, but it would still fetch quite a sum if he were to sell it. Even as the thought occurred to him, he changed his mind and looked once more at the stone.

The image of a plain, unaffected woman flashed through his mind.

He thought a while longer, then neatly wrapped it in a cloth he had on hand and tucked it carefully into the pouch at his waist so that he wouldn't lose it.

After returning to town, Alec headed straight for his client. The jewelry shop sat at the edge of the finest neighborhood. It was small but very refined. As Alec opened the door, the young shopkeeper looked up from where he'd been repairing some pieces. He was Alec's current client.

"Alec. You've returned very quickly."

"I have a good idea of where most of the magical beasts are."

"I see."

Alec handed him the materials he'd collected. The shopkeeper removed them from the preservation bags and began checking each one over with scrupulous care.

"There is one large scar, but it looks old and was likely there from before. Other than that, these are of exceptional quality. There's hardly a scratch other than where they were cut in half. With pieces this large, I should be able to design to my heart's content. Thank you very much. I confirm receipt of my requested items."

"I'm glad you're pleased."

Alec waited until the shopkeeper had finished signing his request ticket before broaching the subject.

"I'd like to make a personal request. Would that be all right?"

"Of course. What might it be?"

Alec pulled the magic stone out of his pouch and placed it on the counter. The shopkeeper murmured, "Pardon me," and gazed at it with great interest.

"Is this a natural magic stone? Could it be that it came from the rainbowed ants?"

"Yes. I'd like to have it made into some kind of jewelry, but I don't know what

to choose.”

The shopkeeper paused. “By which you mean it will be a gift?”

“It will be, yes.”

“For a woman or a man?”

“A woman.”

The shopkeeper looked thoughtful. “Depending on your relationship with the woman in question, and her personal tastes, the pieces I would recommend to you would differ.”

“Is that how these things work...?”

He’d thought it would be simple, but it seemed it might turn out to be unexpectedly difficult. To be honest, Alec had absolutely no idea what sort of gift might make a woman happy.

“In the case of wives and fiancées, many women hope to receive rings. However, if she isn’t either of those, then a ring might carry too much meaning for her to readily accept it. Even with earrings, there is the question of whether she prefers pierced or not.”

After a pause, Alec said, “I see.”

“Pardon my rudeness, but may I ask your relationship with this person?”

For a moment, Alec wasn’t sure how to answer. After a little thought, he replied.

“She’s a colleague. The other day, she helped me quite a lot and I thought I’d give her something as thanks.” He pictured Shiori in his mind. “She’s an unpretentious sort of woman. I’ve never seen her wear any kind of jewelry.”

She was an unaffected woman who only wore light makeup, but that made her all the more enchanting without detracting from her inner charms.

The shopkeeper pondered for a moment, then began pulling samples from the glass display cases and lining them up on the counter.

A few days later, Alec picked up the finished piece and chose the proper time

to drop by the Guild. He had thoroughly investigated Shiori's schedule for that day. She was due to return from completing a request.

He killed time by reporting on current developments and exchanging information with colleagues who happened to be around. Then Shiori finally arrived. Seeing that she'd noticed him, he raised a hand in greeting. She smiled and nodded in return. Alec waited for her to finish her report and for the measuring of her experience level to be completed before he snagged her. He pretended not to notice Zack, who seemed to want to say something, and took Shiori outside. He led her to a spot where they wouldn't be conspicuous.

In the face of her mystified expression, he grew nervous, which was quite unlike himself. But he retrieved the newly finished bangle from the breast of his clothes. At the shopkeeper's recommendation, he'd had it taken out of its box and wrapped it in a cloth to make things less formal.

It was a delicate bangle of a pale gold color, with finely wrought leaves intertwining at either end. The magic stone, carved into the shape of a berry, adorned the center of it. It didn't stand out too much, but it didn't hide either. The bracelet had an exquisitely balanced presence. It was just the right design for a modest woman like her.

"This is thanks for the other day. Please accept it."

Shiori looked surprised. As she hesitated, he took up her left hand and slipped it gently onto her dainty wrist.

"Stones of this color are supposed to help ward off evil. Our work holds many dangers. If you'd keep this with you as a sort of talisman, it would make me very happy."

After a moment, Shiori spoke. "Thank you very much."

At first, she'd seemed troubled and her expression had been apologetic, but then it appeared she'd decided to accept the gift. Shiori gently stroked the bangle and murmured, "It's beautiful." Then, as if suddenly realizing something, she held the bangle up to Alec's eyes.

"Oh, I thought so." She laughed. "The color of this stone... It's your color, Alec."

She told him she'd take good care of it. Then, saying that she still had another job she needed to finish up, she headed back into the Guild.

It's your color, Alec.

Realizing the significance of her words, Alec blushed a bright red that was completely unbecoming of his years.

He hadn't paid it any particular attention, but now, after it was done, he became aware of the fact that he'd given a woman a piece of jewelry the color of his own eyes. He hadn't planned that at all. He wasn't sure if he should feel upset about messing up so badly, or happy that things had turned out like this. Either way, Shiori had accepted it.

Did she know what it meant? The meaning of a man giving a woman something to wear on her person that was the same color as his own eyes...

It was proof that she belonged to him.

Alec thought a moment. "I see. A charm to ward off evil, was it?"

Not bad at all.



Interlude 1: A Gathering to Comfort a Brokenhearted Man

“It’s unusual seeing you drinking to get dead drunk.” Nadia smiled wryly even as she enjoyed the fizzing sensation and sweet-tart aroma of the hard cider spreading through her mouth.

Across the table from her, Clemens sprawled carelessly. “Leave me alone. Honestly, I’m under considerable strain right now.”

Even in his drunken stupor, he answered sincerely. You could say it was just like him to do that. He did have a love of drink, but he absolutely was not the kind of man to let the alcohol consume him. Taking the time to really savor the flavor and aroma...that’s the kind of person he was. As he was here in this state in spite of that, he must be enduring a lot at the moment, just as he said.

“But, well, that was a real surprise. I’d thought he was resting up at his lodgings.”

When Alec had showed up at the Guild, he’d been wearing a familiar shawl—one of Shiori’s favorites—wrapped around his shoulders. And when he’d left, the faint scent that had wafted from his chestnut brown hair had been that of her usual shampoo. Even without saying a word, it was easy to tell where he’d been.

“I never imagined that Shiori had been taking care of him at her place.”

Clemens slowly sat up and gulped down what amber-colored liquid remained in his glass.

Nadia had been dimly aware of the fact that Clemens had a strong affection for Shiori. However, since he was always so gentlemanly and kept a step back from her, it was likely only those he was closest to that knew of his feelings. Viewed from the outside, his quiet love, gently wrapping her in tender care and protecting her from behind, could look like the love of an older brother or a father. And that’s exactly why Shiori hadn’t understood. Either that, or Clemens

himself hadn't comprehended the depth of his feelings for her.

Clemens poured himself another drink and drained it dry. Then he sprawled again, stretching his arms across the table. His wavy silver hair slipped like silk as it spread over the tabletop. It wasn't quite as glossy as when Nadia had first met him, and its color had faded to a duller silver. The handsome, alluring features indicative of a man with a gentle nature that had captivated so many women now bore the marks of his years, presenting an austere elegance that befitted his age. As his refined features maintained that exquisite balance between allure and austerity, it was likely that he'd continue to charm the hearts of women forever.

Nevertheless, it would seem that the heart of the one woman his own heart favored remained unmoved.

"When I first realized that Shiori had begun to open her heart to Alec... If I'm being frank, I felt frustrated. The woman I'd cherished all this time had opened up so easily to a man she'd only just met."

Zack frowned as he gave Clemens lukewarm encouragement. "Then you should've been more assertive. If you had, she might've taken your hand."

Clemens's shoulders trembled slightly. He seemed to be laughing. "I wanted to protect her. I thought that, as long as she was at peace, just watching over her was enough for me, but..."

His words were broken and halting, perhaps because of sleepiness caused by his heavy drinking. He lifted one hand, languidly, and scrambled his silver hair, clutching it at the roots.

"...when I caught her scent coming from Alec, I couldn't stand it. The thought that they're close enough that she's let him go that far, it's..."

Nadia paused. "What?"

"Huh?"

Nadia had been staring at Clemens, but now she turned her gaze toward Zack. And Zack's brows had furrowed once more. What was it...? It felt like his thoughts had snagged on something in there somewhere.

“Hey, Clemens. You...” Zack shook Clemens’s shoulder, but there was no response. All that could be heard was slightly labored breathing, as if he wasn’t sleeping well. “This guy... He’s got it all wrong.”

“It seems so. I think she probably just let him borrow the bath.”

This was Shiori, after all. She had probably been being considerate, trying to make sure Alec wouldn’t have any trouble after he got home, but Clemens hadn’t read it that way. He’d likely gotten the mistaken impression that her scent had permeated Alec under a different set of circumstances.

“Honestly.”

So he loved her enough that a simple misunderstanding could shake him this much. Nadia smiled wryly as she gazed at her sleeping friend.

“Drinking at home was definitely the right choice. He’s fallen asleep just as we thought he would.”

“Yes, he has.”

As they all knew each other so well, and because she was familiar with the place, Nadia showed no hesitation in crossing Zack’s room, borrowing a blanket from the bed, and gently settling it over Clemens’s shoulders.

“But are you all right with this?”

“Huh? With what?” Zack munched on some blue cheese that they’d had as a side for their drinks as he prompted her to continue.

“Your precious little sister’s going to get stolen away by a man.”

“It’s fine.” There was bitterness in his smile, but at the same time, somehow it beamed brightly. “A man I think of as a precious younger brother is going to take in the woman I think of as a dear younger sister. Nothing could make me happier than that.”

Interlude 2: The Diary of Rurii the Familiar

■October XX

Today was a day where Shiori shut herself in her house to make her portable foods. On days like this, I go out on my own. I'd gotten a request addressed to me anyway.

I paid a visit to Marius's grocery. As the shop hadn't opened yet, the store was empty, making it easy for me to work. As I slipped under the shelves, through the cracks between the wooden boxes, and under the counter, I detected faint heat signatures. When those shadowy little guys cut right in front of me, I quickly entrapped them with my slime, then dissolved them within my body. After repeating the process a few times, the only heat signatures left in the shop were mine and Marius's.

"Thanks. Really, it's such a big help. Here you go—your reward."

He placed some meat scraps and a washbasin full of water in front of me. I gratefully accepted it as compensation for my labors. Then, after scheduling our next appointment, I left the shop. No matter how thoroughly a place was cleaned, if there was food around, those guys would spring up from somewhere, so my work wasn't likely to dry up.

Today, once again, I did good work.

■October XX

Apparently, Shiori had a meeting today. She said it would take about two hours, so I decided I might as well make a visit to give comfort to the grandfather in the sewers. The austere, elderly slime is a deep green, the color of bitter leaves, and he's been modified for sewage treatment. It seems he's been working hard in the same spot for a very long time. When I asked if he ever got bored, he said that living a life where he didn't have to worry about anything and could simply devote himself to deep contemplation was the

absolute best. It made me feel like slimes must each have their own way of thinking.

■October XX

As I was hopping around the Guild, waiting for Shiori to pick out a request, I ran into Clemens. He's a good person who treasures Shiori. Usually, he's got a gentlemanly, refined, grown-up-man sort of feel to him, but lately he's been weird off and on. He'll stare vacantly at Shiori, or at least that's how it seems, and then he'll suddenly turn and knock his head against a wall. The other day, he clapped Alec on the shoulder, then heaved a really deep sigh and hung his head, leaving Alec bewildered.

I'd thought he was the best candidate, but he's so very well-mannered that Shiori didn't notice a thing. It's truly a shame. And I'm sure that his strange symptoms will get better with time.

■October XX

Zack was making a racket about black bugs appearing in his house or something. Apparently, he's never been very good with them.

"But no one's seen any at the Guild in a while, right? It's great, but strange when they used to appear so much. Oh, that's right. It was around the time you showed up that I stopped seeing— Huh? Wait. It-It can't be that you..."

I find that not worrying over the details makes it easier to be happy.

■October XX

When I went to the Guild, Alec called out to me. He's a new, like-minded companion I met about two months ago. He's risen to being the top candidate in the blink of an eye. He really cherishes Shiori and treats her very well. Even now, he's speaking with her in a tender, sympathetic manner. And when she's with him, Shiori seems softer. That's a good thing.

The other day, Alec collapsed and was confined to bed, but it seems he's completely better now. I'm glad. He's not young anymore, so I hope he takes

good care of himself.

“I feel like... Are you thinking something impertinent about me?”

I believe you must be imagining things.

■October XX

Since Shiori was busy preparing our meal, Alec gave me water instead. It was warm and brimming with strong magical power. It wasn't bad in its own way, but Shiori's gentle, sweet water is definitely the most delicious. The first one to give me magic water to drink instead of using it to attack me, a magical beast, had been Shiori. It's what made me decide to follow her.

Remembering it made me want to drink Shiori's water again. I needed to ask her to create some for me. I begged at her feet, jiggling and shaking, and she produced a basinful of water. It was yummy. When she fills a bathtub with it and I can completely immerse myself—that's the ultimate luxury. I think I'll try begging her again later.

■October XX

Soon it will be winter. I'd like to go visit my homeland before it gets genuinely cold. I wonder if my kin are doing well.

There was a time I met some slimes while we were out on a job, and feeling sort of nostalgic, I couldn't stop staring at them. I'm not sure if Shiori did it out of consideration for me, but later she took me very near to my homeland—just once. It was close to the place where we first met. I didn't think she'd have many good memories of the area, so I figured it would be better to stay away after that, but it made me really happy she'd go that far for me.

I wonder if she'd take me again. If not, I could take some time off and go by myself. But Shiori's so kind, she'd probably come with me.

“Rurii, I'm going to close the curtains.”

When Shiori called out to Rurii where it sat by the window, its deep blue body gave a jelly-like shake. She'd been worried if the slime would be all right in the winter since it seemed to be mostly made of water, but it was surprisingly unconcerned. And when she thought about it, the slime was of a variety that lived in the cold northern areas, so it was probably built in a way that suited the region.

As she reached out to close the curtain, she happened to glance outside and her hand stopped in its motion. Amidst the twilight overtaking the town, fluttering down like white cotton, was—

“Oh, it’s snowing.”

People walking along the street below stopped in their tracks and turned their eyes toward the sky. Some ducked their heads and pulled their mantles more closely about them. Others spread both hands wide, looking up as if in welcome. There were couples who drew closer together, giggling as they watched the snow melt on their upturned palms. Their reactions were all different. It was almost as if Shiori could see the different feelings and memories the people below had about snow. Her eyes narrowed gently in a smile as she began to enjoy herself just a little.

Alec, who was walking with Clemens and Nadia—probably on their way home from work—waved up at her from below. When she opened her window, Nadia called out an invitation.

“We’re about to go have a drink. Want to come?”

Shiori nodded. Hurriedly, she grabbed her shoulder bag, which already had her wallet in it, and threw on a warm cloak lined with woolen fabric.

“Let’s go, Rurii.”

She raced downstairs and opened the door. A piercingly cold wind immediately blew against her cheeks, but each smile that greeted her was warm. As she joined the circle of her companions, Alec took up a position at her side as though it were only natural. Finding it a little embarrassing, Shiori laughed. Rurii bounced upward from the ground at her feet.

The magic lanterns cast their warm orange light over the cobblestones, and

the adventurers began walking toward a tavern from which they could hear a cheerful tumult spilling out into the street.

It was the season of autumn's end. And the first snow, heralding the coming of winter, quietly turned everything in the town a beautiful white.

Interlude 3: Their Thoughts and Hearts

1

The fire cracked and popped, softly illuminating the campsite. Rurii spread across the ground, sleeping deeply. Shiori sat beside the slime with her back against a tree and a blanket wrapped around her, looking through a field guide to materials and ingredients she carried with her. As the reference book was meant to be taken on the road, it was palm-sized so that it wouldn't be unwieldy regardless of the destination. The explanations and diagrams covered everything from plants, animals, and magical beasts, to the best times to harvest given materials. Though it was small, it was very detailed, and it was said to have been a favorite of many readers since its publication.

Here and there, on little notes inserted between the pages, she'd added information she'd gained herself. And she'd written them in the official language of Alphandis.

I've gotten so used to everything.

Though in the beginning, she'd written memos in Japanese, she now wrote pretty much everything in the official language.

This kingdom... This world... The more she learned of its language and customs, the more her memories of Japan faded.

Her body had already completely adapted to this world. The language, the work, the food... Every aspect of daily life was completely familiar now. And she'd even gotten used to the things that hadn't existed in the other world—like magic, magical tools, and magical beasts.

But her heart... Though it seemed to have grown used to everything, it still hadn't adapted.

Not having a single thing to show her roots other than four-year-old memories that only existed in her heart... She hadn't thought it would make her

feel so helpless and forlorn. Even if, for example, a country's framework disappeared and the country itself ceased to exist, the scenery that remained would tell people that their homeland had once been there. Shiori didn't even have that.

A "welcome home."

She longed for a place that would accept her unconditionally.

There were people who welcomed her. But there was a part of her that put up walls between herself and them. Because she was a person whose standing was so uncertain, she didn't have the confidence to try to jump over those walls. If one day, like before...

"You're an outsider, so it's not like it matters." That's what she'd been told before she'd been cast away as unneeded.

I'm scared.

The word which had been thrown at her that day, "outsider," had been horrible to endure. It made her wonder if maybe there was no place for a stranger like her in this world, having come from a different one. When she thought that one day, somewhere, she might be completely ostracized, she just couldn't work up the will to take a step forward.

I'm just pathetic. Quietly, she put her hands on her upper arms as if hugging herself. *I suppose wounds and scars really don't fade away easily.*

Scars that don't fade. Wounds of the heart, and...

It was about two hours until dawn. In the dark forest, all that could be heard was the soft crackling of the fire and the breathing of her companions as they slept.

Suddenly, thinking she'd heard someone's voice, Shiori looked around. She focused her attention on her search magic, but there didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary.

Wait. There was a rustling of clothes as someone stirred.

"...nghh...ah..."

Shiori heard a sigh of breath mixed with cries of pain. Alec tossed and turned

in his sleep, clutching at his blanket as if trying to tear it off.

Is he having a nightmare? Quietly, she drew nearer and knelt beside him.

His brow was deeply furrowed in a frown, as though he were trying to endure something, and ragged, irregular breaths slipped from his slightly parted lips.

“...why do...you...me...?”

His face, usually so gallant and virile, had twisted into something like the expression of someone crying.

What kind of dream was he having?

Who is this “you”? Who’s tormenting you?

It was just like that other time. When he’d had nightmares while he’d been confined to bed, when he’d asked her not to leave, when he’d thought that perhaps none of it had been real... Then, too, he’d sorrowfully, painfully called out someone’s name.

He was just the same as her, with a memory of something that had created a deep wound.

“Alec, wake up.”

She shook his shoulder, then gently stroked the hand that held tightly to hers in a soothing manner. His hand squeezed hers strongly in return, as if clinging to her.

“Alec.”

She called his name once more and lightly patted his cheek. His lashes trembled, and his eyes opened just a little. The light of the campfire flickered in his dark magenta eyes, eyes which looked terribly anxious.

Shiori spoke. “It’s all right. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Will you truly stay by my side?”

“Yes. I’ll stay right here by your side. Don’t worry.” She stroked his cheek as she spoke.

He smiled, as if relieved, and closed his eyes once more. He pulled Shiori close, probably without being fully aware, laid his lips against her palm then

pressed it to his cheek as if to make sure of its warmth, and fell asleep that way.

Well, this is a problem.

It had only been two months since she'd met him, but he'd been there for her when things were difficult—he'd patted her head, held her hand, and even held her in a close embrace. He was a kind person who wrapped her cold heart in warmth.

And when he himself was suffering, he was a person who exposed his weaknesses and clung to her as he was doing now.

If it were him, she might be able to allow herself to get close. Instead of a relationship where just one of them protected the other, they might be able to build something where they both supported each other.

But she was scared. When she thought that, in time, she might be cast aside for reasons she had no control over, as she had been that day, it terrified her.

And yet...

"If you so wished it, I would be that place for you, a place where you belong."

This person drew closer to her, little by little, closing the distance between them, saying he'd give her a place to belong, and she...

I feel like I might fall in love with him.

She brushed his chestnut brown hair aside and quietly placed a kiss that was no more than a brush of lips against skin on his forehead.

2

"...?" Thinking he'd heard a human voice, Zack's consciousness rose to the surface.

Physically, he'd become used to sleeping in such a way that he could rouse himself quickly if anything happened, and not just within the campsite, but also in the vicinity of it. Sensing a faint hint of something unusual, he rapidly came to full alertness.

"...ngh..."

Someone stirred and cried out. It was Alec.

He's having another nightmare?

From time to time, Alec had periods where he'd have terrible nightmares. Specifically, it was especially noticeable upon his return after a certain valued client called him in and sent him away from Tris for long stretches. Zack didn't want to go tramping around inside Alec's heart with his boots on, but he was worried that Alec was accepting work that took a heavy emotional and psychological toll. And yet, though they'd been on close terms for a long time—nearly twenty years—his friend didn't say a word.

Zack had once mentioned that he was around to talk if anything ever troubled him, but Alec had just smiled vaguely, saying, "If I feel like it, maybe one day," and dodged the issue. That's why Zack still hadn't been able to get to the core of it. The best he could do was to invite him for a drink now and again to relax.

It's the same as with Shiori.

A thin wall that wouldn't allow him to step closer.

No, maybe he should've charged in anyway. If he'd managed to close the distance between them, even if it had only been a little at a time, maybe that heart would have opened to him. If that had happened, then perhaps...

"...nghh...ah..."

Alec tossed again as a sighing breath mixed with cries of pain slipped from his lips. He seemed to be suffering horribly. He needed waking. Just as Zack moved to do it, someone quietly knelt beside Alec.

It was Shiori.

She called out to Alec quietly as he writhed in his nightmare, gently took his hand, and stroked his cheek. Alec woke and clung to her hand, returning her grip.

"It's all right. I'm not going anywhere."

"Will you truly stay by my side?"

"Yes. I'll stay right here by your side. Don't worry."

Her voice was gentle and soothing. Reassured, Alec pressed his lips to her hand and fell back asleep. She looked down at him lovingly, and lightly kissed his forehead.

Zack's breath caught at the sight of them quietly expressing their feelings for each other.

Oh, this is just too...

He wasn't sure exactly when, but he'd seen a religious painting in a church when he was little. It had been a depiction of a deeply wounded knight, and a goddess who'd fallen from the heavens and broken her wings. And just like that goddess who had bestowed a kiss of healing upon the knight though she'd been hurt herself—a solemn tableau set amidst a quiet stillness—the scene before him was...

The sight of them nestled together was so terribly natural, it made Zack think that maybe it had been inevitable that the two had been drawn to each other.

And it made him realize something.

It's impossible now...isn't it...

There wasn't any room for anyone to come between those two. In this moment, he understood very clearly that the person to take Shiori's hand and embrace her would not be himself.

And, if that were the case, then there was nothing to be done but to seal away his feelings.

While he'd thought it was enough to simply watch over her like an older brother, in truth, his heart was that of a man wanting to hold that woman in his arms. He only realized it when he noticed that her eyes had begun to hold a certain passion as she looked at Alec—when it was already too late.

His heart hurt with a slow, seeping pain.

But Zack was neither so young nor so childish as to push his way between them when they seemed to share the same feelings for each other. Besides, they were both precious to him.

A friend he'd shared a friendly rivalry with ever since he'd been a novice.

And probably the first woman he'd ever loved from the bottom of his heart.

She was a woman who was strong to the core, working desperately to stand on her own and face the future—a woman who was kind, gentle, and so very fragile. As he'd watched over her, she had become very dear to him, this woman.

He wished for happiness for each of them.

But he hoped—he begged—that he be allowed to express his feelings, if only in his heart. Before he sealed them away, just once... Just once would be enough.

To say to her that he...

I loved you, Shiori.

3

That guy's really completely entrusted his heart to Shiori. The corners of Nadia's mouth drew upward into a secret smile as she kept her eyes closed and her breathing even, pretending to sleep.

She couldn't help waking when she heard Alec moaning in his nightmares. She'd thought she'd go wake him up if it got bad, but Shiori had calmed him before she'd needed to do that.

It had been extremely easy.

When Alec was in the throes of a nightmare, Nadia would force him awake to free him from the bad dreams. But up until now, he'd never fallen back asleep with as peaceful a countenance as that. Even after waking, the nightmares would drag at him, and with a dark, depressed expression, he'd gulp down some alcohol to force himself back to sleep. That's what usually happened.

So what about the Alec she'd just seen? He'd clung to Shiori's hand, kissed her palm, then—with a calm expression, and a slight smile on top of that—fallen into a restful-looking sleep.

It just showed how healing Shiori's presence must be to him.

Nadia had known Alec for quite a while. She'd recognized long ago that he had some kind of huge wound in his heart. And she also understood that it still tormented him, even now.

Alec carried a wound that gave him nightmares to this day. And Shiori, who gently soothed that hurt, was deeply scarred herself. Both of them hid their wounds, acting like nothing was wrong, and only allowed their suffering to show in places where they couldn't be seen. It was horribly painful to watch.

In a certain way, the two were a lot alike.

It might have been only natural that Alec would be drawn to Shiori.

Look at how far he's let you in. It's all right for you to let yourself depend on him too, Shiori.

It may have seemed like Shiori let Nadia and the others get close to her, but in truth there was a part of her that always kept her distance.

Ever since they'd taken her in four years ago, when she'd collapsed with nowhere to go and nothing but her own person, they'd looked out for her. But when it had been important, they'd failed to notice anything was wrong. The regret they'd felt over that had ended up giving rise to a certain reserve when it came to Shiori. It was only the slightest of things, but Shiori, as perceptive as she was, had surely become aware of it. And it might have been the idea that everyone was being careful of her for her own sake that had made her put up those walls.

That's why Nadia and the others hadn't been able to break them.

But those two, each of them wounded, were drawn to each other, and little by little they closed the distance between them. Instead of forcing their feelings on one another, they consoled each other, each offering as much warmth as the other wanted, melting the thin walls of ice in their hearts.

And if, one day, their wounds were healed and the two of them were able to be together...

That would truly be a joyous thing.

Alec already trusted Shiori. All that was left was for Shiori to take that one

step forward.

And if there were anything the rest of them could do, it would be...

To give her a little push, I think.

Still...

Nadia quietly opened her eyes, just a little, and checked on Clemens, who was sleeping next to her. At first glance, he seemed to be sleeping, but it was likely that he was only pretending, just as she had been.

His brows had drawn together slightly, making a furrow. He must have seen the other two just now... And seen how they so clearly shared the same feelings for each other.

When it comes to him, I guess there's nothing else to do but let him work through it himself.

By the time Clemens had realized his love for her, Shiori's heart had already turned toward Alec. He wasn't the kind of man who'd do anything so disgraceful as coming between the two of them. Probably, all he could do was wait and let time dissolve those feelings he held, feelings which could never be fulfilled.

And I'll keep him company if he needs to go drown his cares in drink again, like he did the other day.

Nadia pulled up her blanket and, remembering Clemens in his drunken stupor, smiled secretly beneath it.

4

She had said she'd stay with him.

"If you cry it all out, you'll feel a little better. No one is watching. I will be right here beside you."

There had once been a woman who had said these things and taken Alec, who had still been just a child, into her bosom. She'd been kind to him. It had felt as though she'd wrapped him in warmth.

He'd loved the woman like an older sister. By the time he'd grown so that his height had surpassed hers, his feelings had transformed into romantic ones. He had loved her. And she had said that she loved him. It might have only been puppy love, but he had been happy. And he'd even thought that, despite the difference in their stations, they would have a future together.

Oh, why did you...?

"If you renounce your right to succession and cast aside your royal standing, what value could my memories with you possibly have?"

Why did you say such cold things?

Why did you say the same things as all those other horrible people?

"Then, in the end, you were only after my standing, just like they were."

All the warmth she had given him, all the kindness, all of it... It had all been a lie.

"Alec, wake up."

He felt himself being shaken, and his consciousness surfaced.

"It's all right. I'm not going anywhere."

Shiori's gentle voice. Her warm hands.

"I'll stay right here at your side. Don't worry."

This woman didn't know his true standing. And even when she saw him like this, just as he was, she didn't laugh at him for being a pathetic excuse for a male. Instead, she stayed with him. And in spite of the fact that she herself was wounded, she reached out a hand for him to cling to—this gentle, kind woman.

He held tight to her words and her hand, safe in the knowledge that she wouldn't shake him off, and fell asleep once more.

A place where he belonged.

Alec found himself wanting to get closer to Shiori, who'd said she'd stay beside him. Because, unlike the woman who had given up on him, and unlike

those so-called companions who had cast Shiori aside, no matter what happened, Alec would never abandon her.

He wanted her to rely on him, to let him take care of her—he wanted her to really see him.

I...love you, Shiori.

Part 2: The Familiar's Homecoming

Chapter 1: The Visitor

1

Someone is watching me.

Ever since Alec had stepped out of the Guild, he'd felt clinging eyes on him. He hadn't sensed any malice, but the undeniable discomfort caused him to frown slightly.

He kept part of his attention on the gaze coming from some unknown direction even as he walked beside Shiori down the cobblestone street, with all the people going to and fro. They were headed to different destinations today, but Alec had used the fact that their paths were the same for part of the way as a reason to walk with her like this. He wondered if it was selfish to want to spend a little time together, no matter how brief, each day.

Though Shiori was a refined woman overflowing with kindness and consideration, in some ways she was very neutral and didn't make others aware of her as a woman rather than a person. When it came to jobs, that part of her nature made it very easy to work with her. Contrary to what might be expected, it was often taken as one of her charms and drew a lot of men to her. And a lot of enemies.

But the one thing Alec didn't want to do was try to rush things and end up doing anything that might hurt her. She seemed to be carrying something in her heart. It was all very well that he'd gotten caught up in the moment and told Zack that he'd have her for his own, but in practice, he spent each day closing the distance between himself and Shiori, little by little.

He wanted to cherish her. And he wanted...for her to cherish him.

A cold wind blew relentlessly against them. Shiori shivered. Alec casually

pulled her close and she looked up at him in surprise. There was no way the flush in her cheeks was from the cold alone. Chuckling, Alec enjoyed the warmth.

It was that time of year when the feel of coming snow was growing stronger, and most days were cold enough to make going out a bother. Unfortunately, requests continued to come fluttering into the Guild with no sign of relenting. If he could be with Shiori like this, Alec could forget the cold, but that was not to be.

They stopped at a fork in the road. He regretted the loss of her warmth even as he stepped away, turning to face her.

“Well,” she said, “have a good journey. Please be careful.”

“I will. Oh, if we manage to make it back in time, what do you think about having dinner together?”

“That sounds nice. All right, if we make it back in time.”

Alec and Shiori promised to meet, and just as they were about to part ways, he looked around. Amidst all the people coming and going, Alec thought he caught a glimpse of a familiar figure with golden hair walking away. He froze.

No, it can't be.

That person couldn't possibly be here in a place like this.

“Is something wrong?”

The question was tinged with confusion, and it snapped Alec back to himself. He turned his eyes back to the bustling crowd, but the figure was gone. It must have been his imagination, or a coincidental resemblance.

“No... It's nothing. Well, I'll see you later.”

Shiori seemed confused for a moment. “Oh. Yes. Have a good journey.”

She waved to him, and this time he turned and headed toward the West Gate.

The gaze Alec had felt on him since earlier had disappeared without his noticing.

After seeing Alec off, Shiori looked up at the sky, blushing at the memory of the moment he had pulled her close. The sky that had been a brilliant cerulean blue in the summer, was now a dark gray where it peeked out from between the high, thin clouds that drifted by. It was a sky that foreshadowed snow.

In a few days, it would be a new month. True winter wasn't far off. Shiori wanted to buy a few pieces of equipment for winter work. As she'd been promoted in early spring, the difficulty level of the requests she undertook had risen in kind, so she was a bit uneasy about using the same gear she'd used last year. Winter equipment had a tendency to be heavy no matter what, but many of the items from shops that catered to adventurers managed to be both light and sturdy.

The drawback is that shopping solely at specialty shops will be a little expensive, but it's better than dying.

She had just set her mind to assembling herself a full set of those kinds of clothes and turned toward a street with such specialty shops, when two men called out to her.

"From your appearance, I'd guess you're an adventurer. If it isn't too much trouble, might I ask you to help us find our way? We've gotten ourselves lost."

The man asking this question in a bewildered sort of way had golden hair and appeared to be around the same age as Shiori herself. The other man had flaxen hair, and his brows were drawn down as though he were both bothered and embarrassed. As they were both dressed in traveling clothes and wore swords, Shiori wondered if they might be swordsmen on some sort of journey. But when she looked more closely, she saw that their clothes and equipment were tidy, of good quality, and showed little signs of wear. If she had to say, they had the air of nobles traveling in disguise. The flaxen-haired man's sword was the only thing that gave off a sense of well-used menace.

"If it's somewhere I know, I'd be happy to show you the way."

The two men's anxious expressions relaxed into smiles at her words. Though they were masculine, their smiles bloomed like lovely flowers.

Somehow, these two are just really beautiful.

The people of this land all had chiseled features and pronounced eyes and noses, unlike Shiori herself. To be honest, they all looked beautiful to her. Even so, with these two—perhaps because their gentility showed through in every little refined, exquisite gesture—the beauty of their forms was even more pronounced.

“May I ask where you’re going?”

“To the Lindegote Hotel in the First District.”

That’s a super high-class hotel!

It was the name of a hotel favored among the wealthy and the nobility, especially by those of the very highest social standings. It was said that when royalty visited Tris, that was where they stayed, and the cost of a single night’s stay would send dozens of gold coins flying from their purses. The hotel was a long-standing, high-class establishment. The moment its name sprang from the man’s lips, Shiori had been struck with terror. These were high-ranking nobles. Knowing that any offense could lead to terrible things put her on her guard.

“Shall I arrange for a carriage? It will take twenty minutes to walk there.” She offered this option, but the two said they didn’t mind walking.

“Since we’ve got this opportunity, we’d like to see more of the town.”

The two men smiled wryly, explaining that as they’d taken a stroll, sightseeing along the way, they’d gotten lost. This sort of thing happened a lot. Being asked for directions by stranded travelers who’d lost sight of their destinations in the town wasn’t uncommon at all.

Shiori stood just slightly ahead and off to one side of them, to lead the way, and began walking. Rurii bounced along at their feet. Perhaps thinking the sight amusing, the two men’s manner relaxed as they watched the slime.

“It’s unusual to see a slime as a familiar.”

“I often hear that. Though, Rurii is more of a friend than a familiar.”

“A friend, is it?”

The golden-haired man laughed at Shiori’s words, his dark magenta eyes

narrowing in delight. Shiori didn't know why, but the way he smiled reminded her of Alec for an instant. Maybe it was because their eyes were the same color.

"When I think of familiars, the idea of forming a contract with a strong, wise species is the impression that stays with me. Does that mean that he...? May I call it a 'he'? Is he strong as well?"

"Rurii is very dependable. I owe him my life."

As she said the words, Rurii jiggled proudly. The two men looked surprised. With their interest piqued, they waited for her to continue. Shiori thought hard about how to explain without the story getting too heavy, and chose her words with great care.

"There was a request I'd undertaken where I ended up alone and unable to move. That's when Rurii came and carried me back to town. I think it was probably to repay me for sharing my food with him, but he's stayed with me ever since. We don't have a contract or anything. That's how we're friends."

"Well, that's... That's quite unusual too. A friendship that crosses the bounds of species, you say?" The man with golden hair seemed impressed as he glanced down at Rurii. "Would it be all right if I touched you?"

After his query, the man watched Rurii. The slime gave a jelly-like shake as if to say it didn't mind. The golden-haired man removed his gloves, reached out hesitantly, and began to pet Rurii's body. The other man followed suit, reaching out gingerly and gently touching the bright blue slime.

"I thought he might feel cold, but he's warmer than I'd imagined. And his surface is unexpectedly sleek."

"Yes, he has a sort of springy feel that's quite nice to the touch. It seems like it could be a bit addictive."

The sight of two grown men petting a slime with such enjoyment was oddly cute, and Shiori found herself smiling. Soon, the two stood, having gotten their fill.

"My apologies. We were entirely captivated by your adorable friend here."

"Not at all. I'm glad you're enjoying yourselves."

Rurii didn't seem displeased either. The slime bounced off in very good spirits.

"A friend, huh?" The words slipped from the golden-haired man's lips as they walked.

His tone—affection mixed with a sort of sadness—made Shiori look up at him. His expression turned apologetic as he said, "Oh, my apologies."

He went on with a troubled smile. "I have an older half brother from a different mother, you see. We grew up together like best friends. I was still just a child when I first met him, so instead of seeing him as some boy my father had had by another woman, I was happy to have a new playmate. Even more so since we were the same age. I think my brother felt the same about me. We didn't just study together—we went out exploring, got scolded for doing bad things, and had all kinds of fun. We were more like best friends than siblings. That's the kind of big brother he was."

His dark magenta eyes half shut in nostalgia for the bygone days of his youth.

"We live apart now, and I'd heard that my older brother had collapsed. I came flying over here in a panic."

"Your brother collapsed? That...would be a great worry."

"Fortunately, it seems it wasn't anything serious. And apparently there was someone who nursed him with great care, so he's completely better now."

"I see. I'm glad it wasn't anything dire."

Alec's face came to mind. Just the other day, he'd had a fever and been confined to bed. Shiori wondered if this man's older brother's health had broken down with the seasons changing too. Just as she had that thought, she thought she felt someone's gaze on her and tensed slightly. It felt like the same gaze she'd noticed when she'd been walking with Alec. Was she imagining it? No.

Is someone watching us?

She wasn't sure if it was just due to the nature of her work, or if it was because her circumstances made her stand out, but she'd become very sensitive to the gazes of others. With the way this felt, it was unlikely that she

was mistaken. They were being watched. Now, was the target herself, or these two?

It will tire me, but I'll do a search, just in case.

Since the two men gave the impression of being high-ranking nobility, it was possible that they had an escort of guards maintaining a certain distance from them. But, in the unlikely event that it was someone with ill intent prowling around watching them, things could get troublesome. Shiori surreptitiously cast search magic as they walked. The conditions were tricky with so many people around, but, with a few adjustments to the way the magic was used, it wasn't completely impossible to detect such things.

Shiori wasn't sure if it was because the golden-haired man was good at conversation, but he spoke of harmless, inoffensive things, so that there was no unpleasantness and no awkward pauses. The flaxen-haired man occasionally cut in with a few words. As she replied to the men, she expanded her search net. Since she was looking for people and not magical beasts, she probably didn't need to cover a vast range. They must have been within a distance that allowed for visual confirmation.

I wonder if fifty meters will be enough.

Just as she'd thought, there were several presences of concern within a fifty-meter range. Her search net caught every living presence within its scope, but when she paid careful attention to their movements, it was surprisingly easy to differentiate between them. Most of the presences moved freely, in a disorderly fashion. Amidst those, she sensed five which maintained a set distance and moved in the same direction she did.

As an experiment, Shiori tried deliberately stopping at a tourist spot, an old building, to give an account of it to the two men. While she did so, two of the presences continued to travel, but the other three stopped. When she and the two men started walking again, the other presences began moving again too. Shiori tried stopping another two times, and the results were the same.

There was no mistaking it—they were being followed. By three people.

I hope nothing happens.

Perhaps her feelings had reached them, because Shiori and the two men arrived at their destination without encountering any particular issues. The Lindegote Hotel. Its magnificent architecture carried the weight of history. Everyone, from the people entering and leaving the building to the doormen standing on either side of the entrance, looked so sophisticated in their refined attire that it made Shiori feel out of place in her adventurer's garb. Her discomfort made her shrink into herself.

Having safely reached the place they'd wanted to go, the two men turned to look back at her. The golden-haired man took a step forward and suddenly leaned in, bringing his face very close to Shiori's. She reared back without realizing it, but he pulled her into an embrace. The flaxen-haired man looked flustered. He tried to rush over, but the golden-haired man stopped him with a single raised hand, then spoke in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

"You used magic earlier, didn't you? What was it?"

Shiori wondered if the man also had a personal understanding of magic. She'd been found out. Struggling, she tried to get away, but she was no match for the man's strength. Trapped in his arms, she was unable to move. Since Rurii only jiggled a bit, as if asking how she was, the man probably meant no harm, but that didn't make things any more comfortable.

"It seemed like we were being followed, so I used search magic."

Unable to defy his will—the will of a high-ranking noble—Shiori held the turmoil within her in check and answered honestly. It appeared she'd caught his eye in a strange way.

"Search magic? That can only be used over a very limited area, right?"

"I've made some adaptations. I expand the search area and detect signs of life, traces of magical energy. Though, generally, I use it to search for enemies like magical beasts and bandits."

The man's eyes narrowed, and not in the affectionate way they had earlier. This time, the look in his eyes was sharp and probing.

"Can you tell how many people are following us?"

"Three within fifty meters of us. I can't tell beyond that unless I expand my

search area.”

“Impressive.”

The man let out a sorrowful sigh. His piercing gaze softened, and his eyes returned to their previous gentle expression.

“Those three are my guards. It’s hard to feel settled with them nearby and they stand out quite a bit, so I have everyone but this man follow at a distance.”

After a pause, Shiori spoke. “I see.” She sighed deeply without realizing it. It felt as though all her fatigue hit her at once.

“Are you a high-level mage? That was impressive work.”

“Unfortunately, I’m a low-level mage. And I have so little magic power that if I didn’t make my own sort of adaptations, I wouldn’t be useful for anything.”

The man’s arms relaxed a little and the air about him turned to one of concern. “Then, is that why your complexion seems a little pale? Is it magical exhaustion?”

“I’m not sure.” Shiori gave him a strained smile. “I think anyone who had something like this done to them so suddenly would likely turn pale.”

These foreign men’s sense of an appropriate distance was always much too close, and they often acted in wild and extraordinary ways. It put her in quite a predicament.

The man looked a little discomfited as he slowly released his arms. Shiori lightly slipped out from between them.

“I’m sorry. We were the ones who asked you to guide us. I’ve done something terrible.”

“Not at all. I’m the one who should apologize. I shouldn’t have used magic without telling you. I’m very sorry.”

It would seem she wasn’t used to dealing with the nobility at all yet. She’d set them on edge with such a trivial action. The idea that the amount of work she received from nobles might increase in the future felt a little daunting.

The men appeared to take her silence as a sign that she felt sorry or ashamed.

Perhaps out of a sense of concern, the golden-haired man gave her an amiable smile to reassure her.

“We’re the ones who are sorry. Your showing us the way really saved us. It was only for a brief time, but it was a lot of fun. Would this be sufficient pay to show our gratitude?”

“Please, don’t trouble yourselves. Under Guild rules, we don’t accept compensation for showing people around.”

“I see. Then it would be rude to force you to accept it. In that case, allow me to simply express my thanks in this way.” He held out his hand.

Did he mean to shake hands?

As Shiori hesitated over whether returning the handshake would be all right or not, his extended hand took up her right one. He lightly kissed her fingers.

Shiori gasped.

A warm, soft sensation lingered on her fingertips. She’d nearly shrieked, but somehow she’d managed to strangle it down. The last time someone had done this to her, she’d thought the same thing—it wasn’t something she was ever going to get used to. She knew that as a gesture of salutation toward women it wasn’t uncommon, but her embarrassment always took the lead.

The man spoke. “Thank you. For everything. If there’s ever an opportunity, I hope to see you again.”

He gave her an amused smile, perhaps sensing her internal turmoil, then turned and walked away. The flaxen-haired man bowed slightly in an elegant expression of gratitude, then followed after the first man. They both stopped in front of the entrance and looked back at Shiori. They waved easily, as if to tell her it was all right for her to go. After bowing deeply to the both of them, Shiori put the place behind her as if she were running away.

“Your teasing went entirely too far. She’s the person who nursed His Highness, isn’t she? The poor thing turned so very pale.”

As the flaxen-haired man scolded, the golden-haired man chuckled.

“I couldn’t help myself. She’s such an unusual sort of woman. A sudden curiosity about how she might react welled up inside me. Though, I never imagined she’d go pale.”

As he watched the black-haired figure recede into the distance, his dark magenta eyes narrowed. He’d come this far out of concern for his older brother’s health. Making contact with the woman whose nature he’d wanted to ascertain for himself had been a lucky windfall.

“I see. So that is the celestial maiden who’s won Alec’s heart. How interesting.”

2

“All right. Sorry, take care of the rest for me. If anything comes up, Alec...isn’t here today. Leave word with Clemens or Nadia.”

Zack spoke briefly with the clerical staff, who were busily dealing with paperwork, gathered up a few things, and left the Guild behind him. He’d wrapped up early today because he’d been invited to dine with an old friend.

I don’t mind seeing him, but that place is such a headache.

And while what he was about to attend might have been called a meal between old friends, it was actually a clandestine meeting between important personages. Which was all the more reason the specified meeting place needed to be of a certain caliber. He didn’t need to go so far as wearing formal dress, but he did have to wear something appropriate.

Well, it’s still a lot more relaxed than going to that guy’s home.

Zack returned to the rooms he rented in a townhouse near the Guild.

He stripped off his work clothes. Then he wet a towel in lukewarm water, wrung it out, and used it to wipe his face and body before changing. He opened his closet and put on a fitted shirt and trousers he’d ordered from a specialty shop. He donned a vest made of the same fabric as the trousers, tied a cravat that suited his hair color around his neck, and slipped his trusty sword and scabbard into a holder, which was more heavily ornamented than the one he used every day, at his waist. Then, over everything, he threw on a tailcoat which

had been tailored with adventurers in mind.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, he shaved off his stubble, then took down his hair, which had been casually tied back. He ran a comb through the red locks to neaten them. After arranging his bangs with the help of hair products he rarely used under normal circumstances, he tied the rest of his hair back with a silk ribbon.

He used the mirror to check his entire appearance. What he saw wasn't the usual rough-and-ready swordsman, Zack Ciel. Instead, there stood the figure of Bleyzac Fauchelle, eldest son of a duke's house.

After a moment, he said, "Nothing more to be done. Guess I'd better go."

With a short sigh, he threw on a cloak in place of his usual greatcoat, and headed out. On the street, he caught a carriage and told the driver his destination.

"To the Lindegote Hotel."

As the carriage swayed and shook, Zack looked out the window to watch as things passed by. Under a sky portending of winter, the carriage left the market district and entered the Second District before approaching the First District, where many of the nobility and the wealthy dwelled. When Zack had still been in active service, he'd often come here due to requests where he'd been specifically asked for. Lately, however, he hadn't had as many opportunities to stretch his legs and travel. If not for his goal of renewing his relationship with an old friend and former client, this wasn't a place that Zack—who'd lowered his own social standing to better match the atmosphere of the town—would have much to do with.

Soon enough, the carriage stopped before a building of a stately and magnificent architectural style. The uniformed doormen waiting at the entrance showed Zack into the lobby where a bellman, who seemed to have grasped quite a lot from Zack's personal appearance, ushered him to an upper floor.

Upon being shown into the designated suite, Zack was greeted by a man with ash gray hair. "It's been a long time, Bleyzac! I'm so glad you seem well."

The big man was in the prime of his life and had an air of composure to

match, but there was also a boyish liveliness to him.

“You haven’t changed at all either, Kris.” They exchanged a hearty handshake, then Zack cheekily patted the other man’s stomach and grinned. “My, is your stomach poking out a bit there?”

“Don’t say that. It’s been bothering me. I haven’t changed the amount of food I eat or the amount of exercise I do from when I was young, but lately I just seem to gain weight easily.”

Kristoffer Osbring, margrave of Torisval and Zack’s boyhood friend, smiled ruefully. Then he gestured toward the inner room and began to walk.

“The other two are already here.”

Zack narrowed his eyes in a probing look. “‘Two’?”

Aside from himself, there was only supposed to be one other person invited to dine with them.

“To tell the truth, our number has suddenly increased by one. Apparently, having heard of Lord Edvard’s plans, our extra guest insisted that they travel together.” Kristoffer held the door to the parlor open with one hand. A man with flaxen hair who had been waiting with his back to the door turned to look over his shoulder. He was Edvard Fauchelle, vice-captain of the Royal Knights, current head of the House of Duke Fauchelle—and Zack’s younger half brother by a different mother. His tense, perceptive expression relaxed like a boy’s might.

“It has been some time, elder brother.”

“Eddie.”

It was the first time Zack had seen his younger brother in a long while, but he didn’t have time to rejoice over that fact before his gaze moved past Edvard and fixed itself on the golden-haired man sitting comfortably on an ornate sofa behind him. The man’s lips curved gently, and his dark magenta eyes sparkled with amusement under hair like threads of gold.

“Your Majesty.”

The butler attached to the suite served an aromatic black tea procured from a tea shop which purveyed its goods to the royal palace. Afterwards, Kristoffer told him not to come back into the room until called. Once the butler had withdrawn, Kristoffer sat on the sofa with a slightly uneasy expression.

“Please don’t mind me and continue with whatever business you had planned. My own affairs have mostly been taken care of already. All that’s left is to go inspect the border area. If you’ll let me listen to your conversation, that’s more than enough.”

Still sitting comfortably, the king of Storydia—Olivier Fersen Storydia—began to sip his tea in an elegant and refined manner. The other three exchanged glances. Zack ducked his head down and silently prompted the one who’d invited them all there to speak. Though it was a secret meeting between important personages, it was supposed to have been a more informal affair. But their unexpected trespasser had made the atmosphere tense.



“Well then...first we’ll discuss the state of affairs at the border.” Kristoffer got the conversation started. “As you know, starting roughly four months ago, we’ve had a surge in the number of refugees coming to us from Dolgast due to the effects of the rebellion there. We’ve established a refugee camp in the Krystale Plains near the fort and dispatched additional squads of knights in response, but we’re still shorthanded. Under the present conditions, our policing forces in this territory are spread thin.”

“With regards to that matter, we’re currently considering dispatching squads from the Royal Knights,” interjected Edvard, who held an important post in the Royal Knights. “Considering the need to maintain a balance of power with our allies, we wouldn’t be able to spare many, but we’re arranging to send what we can. We’ll contact you with a schedule and the exact numbers of our forces soon.”

“We’d be very grateful.” Kristoffer visibly relaxed, but his brow soon furrowed once more. “The other day, while we were busy with all this, a messenger from the Empire turned up, uninvited, at the fort. He didn’t even look at his fellow countrymen. I couldn’t help wondering what he’d come to say. He had a very threatening attitude as he declared, ‘An individual who conspired to incite the rebel army is thought to have crossed the border with the refugees. If you find him, hand him over.’ I asked for a description of the person, but, well, I think it will be hard to find him.”

“Out of curiosity, what details did he provide you with?”

“Apparently, it was a man named Allen Schrigeena. He’s got sandy hair and dark magenta eyes, and it seems he was a bit of a rake. In all probability, it’s a false name, and—eye color aside—if he dyed his hair or something, he’d be able to disguise himself as much as he liked. None of these things provide us any clues.”

The four men exchanged glances heavy with meaning.

“After all, Allen isn’t a very unusual name. And dark magenta is an incredibly commonplace eye color. If we’re going by that alone, I can think of five among my acquaintances who have eyes of that shade,” said Kristoffer with a smile.

“I know at least two people.”

“As do I,” said Edvard, agreeing with Zack.

“And I see someone like that in the mirror every morning.”

The other men could only smile wryly at Olivier’s jest. Olivier returned his now empty cup to the table and his expression sobered.

“Setting jokes aside, that puppet emperor Auvinen has completely lost the ability to unify the people, and he hasn’t realized that the tyranny of the most influential nobles of the Empire has completely exhausted his citizens. The Empire has been greatly weakened through the efforts of spies from our allied forces. This rebellion will likely succeed. As the surge of refugees at each of our countries’ borders has become an issue, our allied forces are watching for the right moment to ride in with a subjugation party. With this, we should finally be able to dismantle the Empire which has caused us and our neighboring countries so many problems. After the rebellion, we’ll divide the territory among three countries.” Olivier concluded by saying that, unlike the other two countries, theirs wasn’t troubled for land, so they didn’t really need it.

For a brief span, silence descended.

“In any case, sending knights means that we’ll be shorthanded in suppressing magical beasts and regular policing. I know that means we’ll be causing inconvenience to the Adventurers’ Guild, but we’ll be counting on you.”

Zack nodded at Kristoffer’s words. The Adventurers’ Guild was a private organization, so on a fundamental level, it was neither influenced by the power of the state, nor did it add to it. But while that was the official position, in practice, the Guild often took on requests behind closed doors. As Zack himself had, for example—and as Alec had.

“Speaking of a man with dark magenta eyes—how is His Highness Aleksey doing? Is he well?” Kristoffer very casually brought up the subject. Before Zack could answer, Olivier spoke.

“About that... That’s actually the main reason I came here. I heard Alec had collapsed, and I couldn’t just sit around, so I came running.”

“What’s this? It’s the first I’ve heard of it. What’s his condition? Is he all right?”

Shocked, Kristoffer began to make a fuss, and Zack couldn't help grimacing. How had Olivier, who lived far away in the royal capital, learned of that?

"I was told his fever had been brought on by exhaustion. He was better after two or three days in bed, but I had him rest for about a week just to be safe. He's completely recovered now, and back out in the field—though it seems you are already aware of that. Do you still have His Highness under surveillance?"

Zack had spoken the first half of his words to an old friend, but the second half had been addressed to the king. He couldn't stop his tone from growing harder.

"The word 'surveillance' makes me sound like a horrible person. Keeping him safe is the main objective. That said, I only had people on him for the first few years after he fled. Alec is far stronger than any humble knight, and once he'd finished growing, his appearance had become quite virile and tough. No one would recognize him as the boy who'd spent a few brief years in the palace, so I let him do as he liked after that. It's just..."

Olivier's words broke off and he cast his eyes downward.

"...A lot of people have their health break down terribly after they come back from a long-term mission. I thought that Alec would stay in the palace a little longer, but he returned here so quickly I was concerned for him. Don't worry. It isn't like I had someone on him day and night. I just had people check in on him regularly. And, to be safe, I'm going to keep watch over him for a little while longer."

Zack understood how Alec must have felt. He'd wanted to do a favor for his little brother out of guilt at having left him behind all alone. And Zack understood Olivier's feelings of remorse for taking advantage of that guilt to send Alec on a dangerous mission, even if it was for the sake of the kingdom. Zack also knew of the deep feelings Olivier had for his older brother, Alec. He understood all of this intellectually. But there was a part of him that remained unconvinced emotionally. Zack had wanted Alec to be free, at least while he was in Tris.

Alec was important to him, like a little brother he'd spent more time with than his actual younger brother.

“But, well, I felt relieved to see him so well. His color looked good and his expression seemed quite peaceful and gentle.”

“You were able to meet with him?”

“No. I left it at seeing him from a distance. But I did meet his celestial maiden.”

Unable to conceal the displeasure in his expression, Zack rose to his feet.

“You...made contact with her?”

Olivier turned a quiet gaze on Bleyzac, who stood stock still and completely pale, and gave him a little smile. He was a good older brother who cared very much for those he thought of as his younger brothers and sisters. It was easy for Olivier to see that he treasured them.

“There’s nothing to worry about. I was simply interested in the woman who had managed to win Alec’s heart. We only met for a matter of twenty or thirty minutes, but it was easy to tell that she is a rare woman. Just as the reports I’d received had indicated. And she uses very interesting magic. It’s enough to make me want her among my personal attendants. She ended up finding all the guards I’d had concealed.”

“Please...don’t.” Bleyzac sank weakly back onto the sofa and covered his still-pale face with his hand. “It’s true she may be exceptional, but she isn’t some ‘celestial maiden.’ Underneath, she’s just a regular woman like any other. When she goes through something painful, she gets hurt, like anyone else would. She’s a woman carrying many wounds in her heart. Please don’t...don’t antagonize her too much.”

“So...she’s important to you then.”

Bleyzac didn’t confirm it with words. But that, in and of itself, revealed the truth in his heart.

“She’s an unidentified woman of unknown origins and standing, so I can understand why you’d be wary of her being close to His Highness. But she is completely harmless. In fact, she’s very weak. She almost died once. While she pretends to be a strong woman who lives without depending on others, the

truth is she's struggling desperately, seeking a place where she belongs. After watching her these past four years, I know. She's put in a tremendous amount of effort just to survive. If it's possible, I'd like her to live a peaceful life. And His Highness as well, of course."

Bleyzac had spoken his true feelings, and those feelings had reached Olivier's heart. He knew. While the woman he'd gotten a sense of through the reports he'd received had been an unknown quantity—mysterious, and therefore suspicious—in person, she was harmless. In fact, she had a positive effect on those around her.

"If she were to hurt my brother or cause harm to the kingdom, of course I wouldn't stay quiet about it. But as his little brother who loves him, and as a friend who lived with him for a few years, I can't help but hope. And I fully understand that thinking this way makes me a failure as a king who must protect his kingdom. But if she can heal my brother's festering wounds, the ones I have never been able to...then no matter how much of an unknown she might be, I would accept her as one of the people of my kingdom. That is how I feel."

Bleyzac lifted his head. His blue eyes met Olivier's gaze as if searching for the man's true motives. Olivier smiled, and the dark magenta eyes which were just the same as his older half brother's narrowed into twinkling crescents.

After finishing their secret talks under the pretext of information exchange, Olivier left Edvard there and excused himself to a separate room accompanied by other guards. He'd been an unexpected participant, after all. Now the others could spend some time together as trusted friends, with no outsiders present. Olivier had achieved his objectives for the moment. He'd confirmed that his brother was all right, and he'd met the celestial maiden.

The celestial maiden.

It had only been a month since Olivier had received reports that the king's elder brother had become captivated by a particular woman.

As a result of some horrifying experiences while he was a prince, Alec had become terribly indifferent to the opposite sex. Even having reached this age,

there hadn't been a single rumor about him. And now, suddenly, the shadow of a woman hung over Olivier's older brother.

His interest piqued, Olivier made inquiries. It turned out that the woman was one Bleyzac had taken under his care roughly four years earlier—she had become close with him, a man whose personal history was that of the eldest son of a duke's house which was intimate with the royal family. And that had happened at the exact same time that Aleksey had gone to the royal capital to train and make preparations to infiltrate the Empire. It was only reasonable for Olivier to be suspicious she might have underhanded intentions. And Bleyzac himself might have felt the same, because it seemed he'd launched his own private investigation.

Olivier had immediately sent investigators under his direct command to look into her, but her personal history from before she'd been taken into Bleyzac's care was a complete unknown. Furthermore, no matter where they searched or how hard, they could find absolutely no trace of her entering the country, even though it was clear from her appearance that she was foreign. They had thought she might have been brought in when she was very young as a prized possession by some noble, but even after exhaustively examining every noble family they could think of, they could find no evidence that she had ever existed in their kingdom.

Perhaps that point had bothered Bleyzac as well, because he'd asked a specialist to take a look at her. But the medical examination had revealed that, other than being weakened, she was in exceedingly good health both mentally and physically. There was not a single trace of the darkness or deformity which were characteristic of a woman who'd been kept secluded.

In the end, the life she'd lived prior to when she'd been taken in by Bleyzac four years ago, and how and why she'd ended up in that place on that day...all of it remained a mystery, even now.

"It's strange, but I couldn't find a single sign that anyone had traveled in or out of the area where I'd found her. It was like she'd suddenly fallen from the sky and just collapsed there."

That's the testimony Bleyzac had given at the time. And it had been that

testimony which had prompted Olivier's intelligence operatives to give her the now-familiar nickname of "celestial maiden." In fairy tales from the far east, the phrase was used to refer to envoys from the heavens.

A celestial maiden, is it? Olivier smiled wryly at the childlike fantasy of it, but he felt it wasn't entirely incorrect.

She was as calm as the evening sea—a woman with an otherworldly air to her.

After actually meeting her, Olivier had gotten the impression that she was exceedingly modest around men. He was aware that he himself had a handsome countenance, and even with that right in front of her eyes, her expression hadn't changed a bit. She appeared to be aware that he was of high standing, but she had shown no signs of flattery along the way, and when their business was finished, she had simply withdrawn.

Though her manner and movements were feminine, she didn't make others aware of her as a woman. That was no easy feat. She was strong to the core—a woman who didn't depend on men to survive. And she was a complete unknown, a mysterious woman who was a mix of determination, kindness, and fragility.

The level of wariness generated by the suspicion that she might be a spy from another country had lessened at a relatively early stage as she simply stood out too much and was entirely too weak. She'd shown no signs of trying to curry favor with Bleyzac, and it had been clear from the information in the regular reports that she was desperately working every day to survive in an unfamiliar environment.

She was a woman who had struggled to learn the language and culture of the land as she lived a life of menial labor... A woman who used the little magical power she possessed and the knowledge she'd gained to their fullest extent to help her companions in their work... A woman who'd been used to the point that she'd nearly died and yet returned to the field unbroken... A strong woman who never depended or leaned on anyone, no matter how close she might be to them... A woman who always extended a hand in kindness whenever anyone sought it...

The hand Olivier had touched when they'd parted had been the rough, cracked hand of someone who worked hard.

Far from being harmful, she was...

"I see. I can understand why he's so enraptured by her."

Aleksey had happily taken on the difficult requests Olivier had made of him out of a sense of guilt. In his position as king, even as he worried for Aleksey, Olivier had taken advantage of that guilt to send him on many dangerous missions. And that was why Olivier couldn't heal the wounds that had been inflicted, one atop another, in Aleksey's heart since they were boys.

Aleksey was a strong man, but deep down, he was also a gentle, sensitive person. How many more wounds had he received by being sent into the Empire?

The image of the two of them walking closely together rose in Olivier's mind. Aleksey had looked down at Shiori with a gentle, peaceful expression Olivier had never seen before. And Shiori had looked back at him with heartfelt concern, even as she drew a line between them.

If it were her...would she be able to heal him?

Please, I want for you to heal him.

Oh, celestial maiden of healing.

Chapter 2: Requests and Rewards

1

“I see. That’s how you ended up getting stuck showing people around all day.”

Alec laughed as he drank his ale, but Shiori poked at her herb-baked Tris salmon in a dissatisfied manner. It was a signature dish of the Tree of Familiars, a tavern that permitted familiars on the premises. After Rurii had completely devoured a dish created for familiars, the slime had amused itself chatting with other familiars in the play area provided by the tavern. Rurii bounced up and down, crowded closely together with a blizzard cat and an airola bat. It seemed like they were talking about something interesting as all three of them displayed behavior that looked like laughter. Shiori was glad they were having fun, but she couldn’t hide her own mild sense of frustration.

“I never imagined I’d get stopped four times. Thanks to that, I wasn’t able to do any shopping.”

After she’d guided the two men who’d appeared to be very high-ranking nobles to their destination, she’d been asked for directions four more times by different travelers. There had been a pilgrim with no sense of direction who had been reading the map backwards, a stranded peddler who hadn’t known which gate led to the border, a husband who’d lost sight of his young wife after having a lover’s quarrel with her on their journey, and a group of three men who’d looked like rakish types.

The birthday festival for the saint to whom Tris Cathedral was dedicated was drawing near, so it was a time of year when the number of travelers and pilgrims increased. That meant being asked for directions more often.

“You look like a nice person. It’s probably easy to ask you.”

“I don’t know about that.”

Alec appeared to have taken it in a positive light, but Shiori saw it differently.

Everyone who'd asked her for help had been male. And she hadn't liked the assessing sort of looks they'd given her. She was used to it, but it wasn't fun.

"I think it's only because Eastern people are rare. That last group, they were so insistent that I join them for a meal... And they kept taking my hand and pulling me close to them. Rurii was about to swallow them whole from the head downward."

Alec's expression turned grim, perhaps because he was imagining a human being swallowed by a slime.

Luckily a knight had passed by on patrol and the whole thing had ended without incident, but if the knight hadn't been there, Shiori might have gotten dragged off to some disreputable location, or the men might have ended up slime food. She had thought about using illusion magic to get away as a last resort, but she didn't want to be too rough with civilians.

"You really... You need to be careful. Some men see foreign women and assume they're in the business. Since you're so small and have a sweet look to you, they probably think you'd be easy to deal with. You attract the notice of men, and not always in a good way."

"Yes... Oh! You mean... I see what you mean."

Shiori had heard that the number of immigrant women who were unable to find honest work because they weren't used to the environment and language, and then had to turn to selling themselves to make a living, was not insignificant. As she herself looked foreign, perhaps people hoped to have that sort of casual relationship with her. Maybe that's why so many travelers spoke to her.

Now that he mentions it, I've been solicited to do that sort of work in the past.

Around the time when she'd pretty much learned the language and had started looking for work, people had reached out to her several times. She had one memory she couldn't seem to forget of a vulgar man who definitely seemed the type to sell women into prostitution. He had said things like, "Wouldn't you like to try your hand at a job where you serve as a conversational companion to gentlemen?" He'd probably had ulterior motives, wanting to make her, a rare Eastern woman, into a playfellow for men.

Once, a seemingly polite and cultured man had come to offer her a hospitality-oriented job at “a membership-based club for gentlemen of the upper echelons of society.” She’d found it difficult to make any kind of decision about it, so she’d asked Zack, just to be sure. His color and facial expression had completely changed, and a few days later, the club was compelled to submit to an investigation by the knights. If Shiori remembered correctly, that had been a nasty affair where young women and immigrants had been tricked and forced into prostitution.

“...I’m not like that, though.”

“I’m sorry?” Shiori sipped her hot spiced wine.

Alec had murmured something as Shiori had been absently recalling memories of those times, but amidst the hustle and bustle within the tavern she didn’t catch what he’d said. As Alec brought a piece of fried cutlet, prepared in the style of the kingdom, to his mouth and chewed it, he looked like he was thinking about something. He swallowed his food, rested his chin in his hand, and looked at Shiori.

“So, this shopping you didn’t get to do—was it just the usual sort?”

“No, I wanted to buy some things to add to my assortment of winter gear.”

“I see. In that case,” Alec said with a smile, “why don’t we go together?”

Alec had told her that he’d wanted to buy some new things as well, and at his invitation, they’d ended up at the Enandel Trading Company. It was a specialist shop which catered to adventurers, handling clothing and equipment made with special methods, and using materials specifically for adventurers and their rough, violent lifestyles. In particular, their clothing, which prioritized durability and mobility, was favored by many, Shiori among them. Their wares were on the expensive side, but they lasted far longer and were far easier to move in than anything sold in regular stores. More than anything else, there was great appeal in the abundant variety of designs and sizes. They even had a selection of formal dress which could be worn while armed, which was unusual and said to be favored by many of the knights.

The inside of the shop bustled with other adventurers, like themselves, who’d

come to buy things. There were many people Shiori wasn't familiar with, but there were a few of her colleagues as well. She looked over at Alec, who seemed to be deliberating over the gloves he held, comparing them to each other. He checked the way they felt to the touch and tried them on. He appeared very serious as he thought about his choice, but he also looked happy somehow. Rurii, incidentally, had been staring unmoving at the snacks for familiars piled on the shelves ever since they'd entered the shop. Shiori decided she'd buy some for the slime later.

Shiori turned her gaze away from Alec and Rurii, back to the overcoats in front of her. "Which should I get?"

She had settled on a shoulder bag and medicine pouch made of frost-resistant materials as well as winter underclothes very quickly, but she just couldn't seem to decide on the all-important overcoat.

Shiori held two pieces which were similar in design. One was a dolman-sleeved cloak embroidered with a design inspired by the Sacred Night of the Nativity Festival. The motif was done in white threads over fabric dyed in a beautiful gradation that transitioned from deep indigo to white. The other was a jacket that was edged in a delicate, detailed snow pattern on an indigo blue background, with an attached cape. Either one would be difficult to leave behind, and they appeared to be made of different materials. Just as Shiori was thinking about asking the proprietor over for an opinion, a hand reached out from behind her to touch the coats. It was Alec. Just as he had the other day, he was once again casually holding her within the embrace of his arms, but Shiori decided to ignore it for the time being. Her heart wouldn't be able to take it otherwise.

"You seem to be deliberating quite a bit."

"Since the materials appear to be different, I was wondering which would be better for work."

"I see." Alec stroked both of the overcoats, then turned his gaze to a different piece hanging from the rack. "I think this one would suit you too."

The piece Alec had recommended was a long cape in elegant shades which transitioned from a bluish lavender the color of asters to a dark magenta. It

wasn't bad. In fact, it was exactly to her taste, but...

"I liked that one too, but when I thought about what it might be like working at a campsite with it, the hems and the area around the arms aren't really..."

With no sleeves, it was a cloak which was meant to cover everything down to the knees, including the arms. As Shiori was a mage, it might have seemed like a good fit, but she was a *housekeeping* mage. She wanted to avoid anything with hems that might prove a hindrance to her work on a campsite. Otherwise, she'd have to take off her coat to do her work in the encampment, and in the winter she wanted to spend as much time as possible with her overcoat on.

"That's true..." Alec looked both apologetic and disappointed.

Compared to when Shiori had first met him and his face had most often shown a tight and guarded look, she felt like his expressions had grown more relaxed and varied of late. Soft smiles, happy looks, troubled expressions, a weakened and slightly weary countenance... You could say they showed his true feelings. And he didn't hide them. Perhaps that was how close he felt the two of them had become.

"I'm sorry. You even went to the trouble of giving me a recommendation..."

"No, it's fine. Don't let it trouble you."

Alec collected himself and compared the two overcoats once more. After looking at them for a while, he turned them inside out and checked the linings. Then he chose one and handed it to Shiori.

"I think this one might be better."

It was the dolman-sleeved cloak that shaded from deep indigo to white.

"It's lined with the furs of Tris hares, which are very good at retaining heat. The same material is used in blankets meant for camping, so I can attest to their heat-retaining properties. And I think the outside is a water-repellent material made from the wool of *erve foure*—river sheep. It's resistant to both rain and snow, and dirt doesn't stick to it very well either, so it seems just right for you."

"Then I'll go with this one. Thank you so much, Alec."

When she expressed her gratitude for his detailed advice, so indicative of an

adventurer who was used to traveling, his eyes gently narrowed in delight. Feeling as though she might find herself thoroughly enchanted by his tender smile, Shiori averted her eyes.

Lately, his behavior toward her had made Shiori realize that he probably had feelings for her. But it wasn't as though he'd expressed anything directly in words. Perhaps that was why she'd found it so difficult to understand what distance she should keep between them. Because this sort of thing... It had happened to her many times before.

There had been men who had talked to her because she was unusual, or because they'd wanted to secure a woman for themselves who was different from the rest. But they had never whispered words of love to her. That way, they could sever the relationship at any time. There had been no shortage of men with such transparent motives.

But...

"...you ended up becoming the place I belong first."

Alec's words rose in the back of Shiori's mind along with the warm, soft sensation that had brushed against her lips.

He knew of Shiori's wounds. He'd probably heard the particulars of her being taken under Zack's protection, and about what had happened with Akatsuki too.

Little by little, being careful not to aggravate her wounds, he was closing the distance between them. It was because he was kind, of course, but Shiori also felt that part of why he was so considerate was the fact that he himself carried some kind of scars.

When his fever had been high and he'd been caught in nightmares, he'd muttered incoherently.

Help me. Why? Forgive me. Please, don't.

They had only been fragments, so Shiori couldn't grasp the full picture. But he had held tightly to her as though he were seeking help, or enduring great pain...and she couldn't help but take his hand. As he'd clung to her, she'd gripped his hand tightly in return.

He's just the same as me...

Unable to speak of it to anyone. Not wanting to. And yet wanting help, wanting a safe place to rest. Struggling with conflicting emotions that were too much for her...for him.

If I've become the place where he belongs...

She looked up at him once more.

...then would it be all right for me to hope that he becomes the place where I belong?

The eyes that smiled down at her were the color of a quiet, calm night, bringing gentle sleep and healing.

2

The reception area and common room of the Tris branch of the Adventurers' Guild had once been the hall of a large inn where many guests had been welcomed. The fact that it could accommodate a large number of people had been a point of pride, but even so, on days like today when every adventurer belonging to the branch gathered, it was hard to think of it as anything other than cramped.

This was a regular meeting held at the beginning of every month. The agenda was generally centered around the discussion of business correspondence, the explanation of various precautions relating to work in the field, and the introduction of new members.

"At this time of year, with the deepening cold and snowfall, difficulty and danger levels are going to increase dramatically. Most of the magical beasts will be in hibernation, so you won't see them, but in their place, the numbers of magical beasts which are active in winter are going to increase. As you know, all those guys are very dangerous. Anyone D-rank or lower needs to be especially careful. Don't ever take on private requests, even by mistake. If anyone comes to you with a direct request, make sure you send it through the Guild."

Zack's words as guild master echoed through the hall. Each person there had taken up a position that suited them and listened attentively. Some wrote down

what they heard in their notebooks, and others listened fervently, as if they were trying to make sure they didn't miss a single word.

"Also, the snow is going to start piling up. Make sure you keep that point in mind when you go out on an expedition. If you're traveling on the plains or near the main roads, I'll leave the decisions to your best judgment. But when you go into special terrain like wooded areas or mountains, make sure you always have at least two people with you who have experience marching in the snow—and whenever you can, have someone C-rank or above take the lead. Now pay attention. In the winter there are more places where simply traveling is dangerous. Do not get careless. If you're not confident, then making the decision to only take requests in the immediate area is an option."

Zack paused and glanced down at the papers in his hand.

"At this time of year, many adventurers meet with accidental deaths. Some freeze to death due to a lack of preparation. Others get caught in avalanches. Oh, about avalanches. Be careful when you push your way into mountainous regions. Slopes that only have a few scattered trees and areas where snowdrifts have formed are prone to snowslides, understand? Try not to use powerful techniques or big magic—anything that strikes a large area—in these places. It's possible that they'll trigger a slide. It's unfortunate, but last year five people lost their lives in an avalanche when someone set off some fire magic on a slope. I'll post a summary of the kinds of places that are prone to avalanches and the advance warning signs up on the bulletin board. Make sure to take a look later. Are there questions about anything so far?"

Zack looked around the room to make sure no one had anything to say, then continued.

"I think many of you are aware of this already, but the number of refugees in the border regions has increased due to the rebellion in the Empire. Most of the knights have gone out in response to that, so it means—and this isn't something to be spreading around—that the policing forces within the territory are shorthanded. It's possible that we'll be getting more requests for magical beast suppression and cleanup operations this season than ever before. And it's also possible that bad sorts have made their way into the country by blending in with the refugees, so just exercise some caution on that point and keep an eye

out. Also...”

Zack paused a moment and made a face that said he found this next thing troublesome.

“We don’t know whether it’s because of the rebellion or not, but the number of adventurers from the Empire coming in and out of our kingdom seems to have increased.”

This caused a stir in the room, and the place suddenly became noisy.

Adventurers from the Dolgast Empire. It was said that the rule of the aristocracy had infiltrated even the Adventurers’ Guild, and that advancement was determined by an individual’s position in society. It was inevitable that the quality of their adventurers suffered in comparison to those of other countries. In recent years, the opinion had been raised again and again that the credentials of all Adventurers’ Guild branches throughout the Empire should be suspended, and that those branches and their members should be struck from the registers.

“As you know, most of these adventurers are the worst of humanity. Their accepted practices are old and outmoded, and they won’t listen even if you try talking to them. So even if you meet one, try not to get involved with them. Apparently, there have already been reports of trouble at branches in areas near the border. If worst comes to worst, and things get sticky, do not hesitate to send them to me. I don’t mind a bit. That’s all from me. If there’s nothing else, I’ll dismiss you for today.”

Zack took the silence in the room to mean that there were no questions or opinions, and gave the sign that the meeting was over. The atmosphere immediately relaxed. As the crowd dispersed, it broke into smaller groups. Some people went outside, while others sifted through the request tickets. There were those who went to look at the bulletin board, and some exchanged information with their colleagues.

“Oh, there’s a request from Shiori.”

Talk of the Empire had made Alec remember all sorts of unpleasant things, so his mood had grown gloomy, but he raised his head when those words reached

his ears. When he looked, he noticed a few colleagues staring at the requests that had been posted. One of the request tickets had made them very excited.

“You’re right. Aw, that’s too bad. I already took on a different request. Blast it, I missed a chance to eat her cooking.”

“The fact that Shiori’s going to be doing the cooking is a huge point in its favor, right? What are you gonna do? If you don’t decide now, it’ll get taken really quickly.”

“Oh, then I’ll take it on!”

“Idiot, you’re not ranked high enough. A summoner isn’t suited for guard duties anyway. And she’s a supporter too.”

“Arghhh...”

While they were deep in conversation, Alec stood behind them and took a peek at the request ticket in question.

Request for escort. Difficulty level B. Round trip to the Blue Forest. For the purpose of allowing a familiar to pay a visit home. The reward includes meals. Client: Shiori Izumi.

Based on the way the conversation was going, they’d decided not to take on the job. When Alec plucked the request ticket from the bulletin board, a few cries of “Oh!” rose from around him.

“If you’re not going to take it, do you mind if I do?”

With strained smiles, as though they had no other choice, a few of the people around him said, “Please do.” Others seemed disappointed and unable to fully shake off their regret. It appeared that there was a lot of competition for Shiori’s request. Given that meals were included, and that those meals would be cooked by Shiori, Alec could understand why.

“Sorry,” he told them.

Alec picked out one or two more requests that could be taken care of along the way. When he took the request tickets to the counter to hand to a clerk, Zack gave him a casual sideways glance and a strained smile.

“I knew it. I thought you’d be the one to take it on.”

Alec paused. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. No deeper meaning in particular. Just...” Zack beckoned to Alec with his fingertips. Alec leaned in closer and Zack whispered, “Don’t you dare make a move on her just because you two will be alone where you’re going.”

Alec grimaced at Zack’s words. There should be limits, even for someone who tended to worry too much.

“Would I behave in a manner so lacking in honor? Who do you take me for?”

When Alec shoved Zack’s shoulder a bit, Zack said he was only making sure, and gave him a smile that seemed somehow resigned. Then his expression changed to a serious one. His gaze shifted to something behind Alec, who turned to see what he was looking at. Shiori was cheerfully talking with Nadia.

“Well, be careful out there and come back safe. And...I don’t know the exact location, but it seems you’re headed somewhere close to where it all happened. Last time she was there, her emotional and mental state became a little unstable. Take care of her for me.”

Surprised, Alec said, “Right. I will.”

He considered the implications of that for a moment, then nodded his understanding.

The place where Shiori and Rurii had first met. It was close to the labyrinth where that incident which had been so horrible for Shiori had taken place.

3

Spare medicines and sewing kit. Changes of clothes, food, cooking implements, bedding, and linens. Shiori shouldered the knapsack packed with all the things she’d need to make camp, and after checking the contents of the various pouches, both large and small, at her waist, she looked down at Rurii, who sat at her feet. The slime had been restless since the night before, but starting that morning it had been continuously jiggling and bouncing around with excitement.

“Calm down. Your homeland isn’t going to run away.”

Shiori spoke to the slime and it gave a jelly-like shake with fifty percent more energy than usual.

“Hmm, if you’re that happy about this, then maybe we should do it more frequently.”

Rurii went back home once every six months. This was only the second time they were going, but it might be good to let the slime go a little more often. After all, it wasn’t as though it were very far away.

Recently, Rurii had begged Shiori about making a trip home. The slime didn’t speak with words, but Shiori had been able to tell from its gestures. It had done things like stare out the window in the direction of its home, and gaze intently at a map of the environs around Tris.

And yet, she could tell that the slime was taking her feelings into consideration. Also, that if she wasn’t inclined to accompany it, the slime planned to go visit its home on its own. But it wouldn’t leave without telling her. Another sign of her strange and wonderful friend’s consideration for her.

Rurii’s homeland was close to the labyrinth where she’d been abandoned that day. But Rurii was a precious friend, and she owed her life to the slime. She wanted to do everything she could to grant its wishes.

And I would hate it if Rurii got attacked by other adventurers along the way...

Though it didn’t happen often, Shiori had heard that occasionally familiars moving about on their own were killed by adventurers or knights who didn’t know that they were familiars. And since many familiars were of relatively rare species, they were sometimes targeted to raise experience levels or with an eye for materials.

Rurii is a slime, and slimes aren’t rare, but it’s still a worry.

For the sake of her adorable friend, Shiori could withstand everything the journey was likely to evoke in her for a bit.

“Well, shall we go?”

Rurii leaped upward, jiggling happily.

Shiori descended the stairs to find Alec waiting for her, dressed in traveling clothes. Last time, Zack had taken her, but this time, Alec had been the one to accept the escort request. He'd been having a pleasant chat with the caretaker, Lache, while he waited. Alec looked over and smiled broadly as soon as he noticed her presence. Lache seemed to find something charming as he looked between Alec and Shiori.

"I'm so sorry I kept you waiting."

"No, don't worry about it. It's still before the time we planned to meet anyway. Did you want to head out?"

"Yes, please. Thank you."

After waving goodbye to Lache, who'd spoken a prayer for their safe journey, they set out.

Their destination was the Blue Forest. It would take about two days to reach it following the main road from the West Gate on foot.

Though Shiori would have liked to sleep in inns during the winter, it would be difficult given the season. Along the main road, there were of course places like villages and rest areas with lodgings, shops, and taverns, but with so many travelers and pilgrims on the road right now, it was possible that they wouldn't be able to find an inn that could take them. That would mean sleeping outdoors. It was at times like these when Shiori missed the reservation systems of her homeland. In this world, pretty much the only ones who could make reservations were those who were so rich and powerful that their coming warranted advance notice.

"It would be nice if we could find an inn to stay in tonight."

"It'll probably be hard though." Alec had come to the same conclusion.

Looking both ahead and behind them, there were more than the usual number of people and carriages on the main road. With the Nativity Festival so near, most of the tourists had come to see Tris covered in beautiful decorations or to visit the cathedral.

"But with you here, it won't be a problem. Though I don't know how much work it is for you." Alec smiled.

“It’s nothing. That’s my job, after all.”

This was exactly the sort of situation where her abilities as a housekeeping mage were of use. Now that she had more skills in her possession, the number of times others sought her out for different kinds of requests had increased, but the core of her work was to take a campsite and provide an environment which was comfortable to spend time in. Her ability to do so was particularly handy in the cold seasons when the snow piled up.

In the winter, when temperatures dropped below freezing, she got more work than she did in the summer. She had provisionally participated in an expedition in the snow and been certified as having had no problems during the course of it. So once she’d become C-rank, she’d started to get a lot of high-difficulty jobs in the wintertime. During that season, the slightest lack of preparation or sudden turn of bad weather could lead to death, and it was difficult to get sufficient rest while camping, so Shiori’s participation was already thought of as indispensable. It was a tremendous responsibility.

Shiori fired herself up, determined to work her hardest again this year, and turned her gaze toward the person and slime who walked beside her. Rurii romped along, bouncing and leaping almost like it was dancing as Alec watched with a delighted smile.

That night, as they’d expected, all the inns were full. Other travelers who had failed to procure rooms, given up on finding lodgings, and decided to sleep outside had already begun setting up campsites in empty lots and out on the plains. Campfires had been lit here and there. Fed up with men ogling Shiori, a rare Eastern woman, as they’d walked around looking for somewhere to set up camp, Alec had suggested they choose a spot at the edge of the forest nearly an hour’s walk away from the village. He’d defended the choice by saying that “if that lot did anything to incur Rurii’s wrath, they’d get swallowed whole and there’d be nothing anyone could do to stop it.”

If Rurii attacked under the cover of darkness and dissolved everything, including their bones, it would be a perfect crime!

The fact that she was having such violent thoughts showed that Shiori herself

was very angry, but she felt guilty toward Alec, who was driving barrier stakes designed to repel magical beasts around the perimeter of their site with a displeased sort of air.

“I’m sorry.”

In truth, it would have been far better to set up near the village, since it would be more convenient for shopping and in case of emergencies, but...

“Oh, no. It’s not your fault. Don’t let it bother you. Those guys are the ones in the wrong.” With a strained smile, Alec added that those guys were worse than blundering magical beasts.

Shiori felt grateful for Alec’s consideration toward her, and as she thought about this, she filled the air inside the barrier with a warmth created by combined magics. It would cool back down after a little while, so she’d have to repeatedly recast it, but if it meant being warm while camping in the winter, this much effort was nothing.

That aside, the barrier that repelled magical beasts was really very handy. The barrier stakes could be procured at temples and from other religious organizations. They were said to be the result of many years’ research by holy mages. The area surrounded by the stakes would be enclosed by a barrier which protected against wicked creatures. It didn’t have much effect against large, powerful magical beasts like manticores or dragons, but it was more than sufficient for keeping most magical beasts away from a campsite. The stakes were favored by many who spent a lot of time sleeping outdoors, like adventurers, travelers, and knights.

Incidentally, the inside and the outside of the barrier generated different types of holy magic essences. The two varieties of essences didn’t mix, which created a sort of wall made of magical energy where they met. By making use of that, it was possible to cast magic which only took effect within the barrier. It was the perfect space in which to use air-conditioning magic.

Once Shiori had made sure that warm air was flowing inside the barrier, she unpacked her baggage and pulled out two small tents. One was light and sturdy, made especially for winter out of snow bear pelts, which were known to be excellent at retaining heat. It was a hand-me-down from Zack, meant for

sleeping in. The other was a bathing tent made from the same materials, but with no floor. It had been custom made, and cost quite a bit, but Shiori had splurged on it for the sake of having comfortable baths.

“Would you like to take a bath today?”

“No, I’m all right for today. I didn’t sweat all that much.”

“I see,” said Shiori. “Then, would you like to try a foot bath?”

“Foot bath?”

“It’s a hot bath where you only soak yourself from below the knee. There’s no need to take off your clothes, and if you soak long enough, your whole body warms up. You won’t get clean, but if you’d like to warm yourself, I highly recommend it.”

When Shiori suggested a foot bath, which had been very well-received the previous winter, Alec, who had an unexpected liking for unusual things, latched onto the idea, just as she’d thought he would.

“That sounds interesting. So yes, please, I’d like one of those foot baths or whatever they’re called.”

“I’ll get it ready.”

While Alec set up the sleeping tent, Shiori prepared the foot bath. And while the bath was only for feet, if she made it too small, the temperature would quickly drop, so it needed to be of a fairly good size. But as it only had to be deep enough to accommodate the leg below the knee, it was easy enough to prepare.

Shiori activated her earth magic and shaped a long narrow bath in the ground. She filled it with water that was slightly hotter than a usual bath, and then it was ready for use. To make sure that Alec’s hips and lower back didn’t get chilled, Shiori spread a fur that was particularly good at keeping in heat over the spot meant for sitting on.

After he’d finished setting up the tent, Alec had watched with great interest. Shiori handed him a towel. He excitedly took off his boots and socks, rolled up the legs of his pants, and dipped his feet in the water. The sight of it was

somehow very sweet, and Shiori brought a hand to her mouth to hide her smile.

Alec let out a deep breath, closed his eyes, and gave himself up to enjoying the water. Soon, his sighs mingled with murmured words.

“This...is really nice.”

His expression, softened by the comfort of the bath, was happy. Shiori was glad. It looked as though he liked it. Rurii had dipped just the edge of its body in the foot bath, and reverted to its original mucilaginous state. Having been much too excited all day, the slime seemed tired.

“Please get nice and warm. I’ll go prepare our meal.”

“All right. Thanks. I’ll leave it to you.”

Shiori looked with amusement at the thoroughly relaxed man and slime, then went to the hearth she’d set up and began making ready for their meal.

That said, setting things up didn’t take much time or effort. Shiori was using her homemade freeze-dried rice and soup, so all she needed to do was boil some water. The main dish was pork shogayaki and she’d already marinated the meat. All that was left was to cook it. She put a pan on the hearth beside the boiling water and began sautéing the meat in a little oil.

It drew an immediate response from Alec. “That smell...”

“Pork shogayaki. It’s your favorite, isn’t it?”

He smiled broadly and looked as happy as a young boy. Seeing her companions’ delighted faces in a campsite like this was the greatest of rewards for Shiori. Their smiles warmed her heart.

I love moments like these.

If it meant seeing her companions smile, Shiori would spare no effort.

Well, of course you wouldn’t. That should be obvious. Cooking’s just about the only thing you’re capable of.

Someone else’s voice flitted through Shiori’s mind and she stopped moving. She hadn’t thought about that in a long time. No... Any time she’d thought she might remember that part of her past, she’d deliberately pushed it out of her

mind.

“Is something wrong?” Alec called to her in a voice tinged with worry.

“No... It’s nothing.”

Having failed to maintain her composure, Shiori’s voice emerged in such a monotone she surprised even herself. Alec gave her a probing look, as though he’d sensed something, then quickly wiped off his feet, put on his boots, and walked over to her.

His hands were warm as they rested on her shoulders for a moment, then he pulled her close. He held her in his arms, tight to his chest, and gently patted her back.

He’s sort of...like an older brother.

A warm, kind person. If Shiori allowed herself to lean on him, she knew there would be no going back. She was terrified of how close she was to completely yielding herself to him and allowing herself to sink into his care.

“I...remembered something unpleasant. But I’m all right.”

“Really? Don’t push yourself too hard.”

Alec didn’t say it aloud, but Shiori thought she could sense the words—*If you want to talk, I’m here.* She gave him a faint smile.

“You’re very kind, Alec.”

His dark magenta eyes widened slightly. Then he looked away. He gave her another smile, this time with a slightly bashful expression, then released her from his arms. So freed, Shiori once again began preparations for their meal.

She used hot water to reconstitute the rice, then piled it into a deep dish. The meat went on top, with the sauce from the bottom of the pan poured over everything. Since Alec appeared to have taken such a liking to the sauce, Shiori had plated their meal like a donburi, a rice-bowl dish, so that he could eat it all without missing a single drop. When she handed the dish to Alec, who had been standing beside her, he looked both excited and surprised. It seemed he found it to his liking. After putting some freeze-dried soup into a couple of cups and reconstituting it with hot water, the meal was complete.

Shiori casually glanced over at Rurii and found that the slime had drunk up all the water in the foot bath while she wasn't looking. Rurii was now heated through, giving off steam, and sleeping very soundly in the tent. If Shiori fell asleep wrapped in the slime, it would probably be nice and warm. The idea flickered through her thoughts as she plated her own portion of their meal.

Alec, sitting on the furs Shiori had spread out in front of the cookfire earlier, patted the empty spot beside him. Apparently, he wanted her to sit there. Shiori did as she'd been invited to do and sat next to him. The spot where they'd brushed against each other ever so slightly felt warm.

With a smile, Alec murmured his thanks for the food, and began to eat.

"Yes. It's really good."

"This tastes horrible! You know, you should at least keep track of what kind of food I hate."

The disgusted face of someone complaining overlapped with Alec's face as he chewed with a contented smile. Just as Shiori's heart had begun to warm, with a *whoosh*, it suddenly cooled again.

This time, she put on a nonchalant look so that Alec wouldn't notice, and sipped her soup. It should have been delicious, but it had no flavor as it slipped down her throat, as though it had gone completely cold.

4

The flames of the open fire and the magic that adjusted the temperature of the air gently warmed the space within the barrier. The pelts laid down over the floor of the snow-bear-skin tent blocked the cold air that seeped up from the ground, helping to maintain a comfortable warmth.

Snap. The fire popped, sending up sparks. As they danced upward, the sparks cooled and melted into the night sky. Alec's eyes followed them a while, for no particular reason, as he stood watch. Soon enough, he shifted his gaze away, lifted the door flap behind him, and looked in on Shiori and Rurii where they slept inside the tent.

Rurii was completely relaxed and sleeping in a puddle-like shape, as usual.

Wondering if the slime might be cold, Alec reached out to touch it, but it was surprisingly warm. Shiori had said that since Rurii didn't seem to excrete anything, the slime must be burning most of the nutrients it consumed and turning them into heat. Unfortunately, when Shiori had started using strings of complicated words, explaining combustion and heat conversion, Alec hadn't understood half of it.

And that very same Shiori was now asleep, wrapped in a blanket and snuggled close to Rurii. In her sleep, she'd pulled her knees tightly to her chest, as if she were trying to protect herself from something. She looked like an unborn child in its mother's womb, or like a baby bird still trapped within its shell.

A shell. Those thin walls.

Though they'd become much closer, Alec occasionally felt as though something would suddenly come between them. And even though she was within arm's reach, a thin wall prevented him from crossing a certain line.

"I...remembered something unpleasant. But I'm all right."

On the surface, she seemed to be acting the way she always did, but ever since that moment, something in her manner had clearly changed. The faint smile that was so characteristic of Shiori had fallen away, and there was a hollowness to her expression. With a look like that on her face, she couldn't possibly be all right.

She'd hidden her true feelings behind a thin wall. Had it been to protect those wounds in the tender parts of her heart? Or, had it been so that she wouldn't be hurt anymore? Perhaps it was both.

Though Shiori had taken the hand Alec had held out to her, in the most critical moments, she wouldn't allow him to get any closer. Alec knew it was to keep anyone from seeing her weakness. He understood that because the same could be said about himself.

But it was just so very...

"She doesn't rely on you?"

Alec, who had been poking at his plate of lightly broiled smoked meat as he

sipped his mulled wine, looked up at Zack's words. Zack slurped his ale with a serious expression, then sighed.

The night that Alec had taken on Shiori's escort request, Zack had taken him to a private room at a tavern, saying, "I promise I won't keep you late. Come have dinner with me." It wasn't the kind of place where customers and staff sped around amid a great hustle and bustle. Instead, it was a quiet place to enjoy conversation and food. Surprisingly, Zack preferred that kind of refined establishment.

"She's not ever going to rely on you. When it's necessary for work, that's a different matter. But on a personal level, she'll never ever turn to anyone for help."

She must have felt forlorn when Zack had first taken her under his protection, but it hadn't really seemed that way.

"Even this request of hers... There was no need for her to go to the trouble of sending it through the Guild. If she'd just asked us, we'd have helped as much as we could. We don't have the kind of relationship where she needs to show that kind of restraint."

At a certain point, this tendency of hers had grown even more pronounced. She'd completely stopped relying on others. It had been because of that incident.

"There must have been something that triggered it, but she insists that her memory of that time is hazy so she doesn't really remember. And as for us... We didn't notice anything unusual about her behavior."

Zack's blue eyes darkened as his words fell from his lips in dribs and drabs.

"Back then, we were all deliberately keeping our distance from her. And the request was cleverly timed so that it came when those closest to her had as little contact with her as possible. That's why, by the time we'd noticed anything, it was nearly too late. The fact that they'd taken on a request from nobles of the Empire was no coincidence. While we were gathering evidence and pinpointing the location where they were keeping her shut up, they took her away and silenced her."

Alec paused a moment before saying, “You mean it was all planned. Then, no matter how you look at it, it should have been handled by the knights, shouldn’t it?”

“Exactly. But we got instructions from headquarters saying that it should look to outsiders as though we were handling it as a problem within a single party. The fact that the guild master at the time had been involved in the affair was kept hidden to maintain the Guild’s credibility. And, at any rate, there was no way to know what actually happened in the labyrinth or how things turned out the way they had. With no witnesses, nothing could be done. Shiori had been nearly unconscious and couldn’t remember. Thanks to that, those guys were acquitted.”

Zack’s head drooped downward and he scratched hard at his red hair. Alec could feel a strong sense of remorse and regret from him. He likely still blamed himself for failing to recognize the situation with Shiori.

“She nearly died because I didn’t notice. That’s why I...I could never tell her I loved her.”

Alec’s eyes flew wide at the confession which had been dropped so quietly into the conversation. As Zack’s head was still lowered, Alec couldn’t see his face.

“You... That’s...”

“Yeah. That’s right.” Zack casually lifted his head with the hint of a self-mocking smile hovering around the corners of his mouth. “Before, you pointed out that maybe I just didn’t want to let her go... You were right. At some point, as I watched her working so hard, I...”

He heaved a long sigh.

“But I have no right to take her hand—not when I couldn’t protect her. All I could do was become her older brother and give her a place as my younger sister. That’s why, Alec...” Zack’s eyes filled with a gentle kindness as he looked at Alec. “I’d always thought you hated women, so I was surprised when you first showed an interest in her. But in my heart, I was happy. There’s a part of you that’s a lot like her. Since you’re both wounded, you’ll know best how to behave toward another wounded person. Becoming overly dependent on each

other isn't good, but...since it's you, I just know..."

Alec touched Shiori's hand, which was curled gently into a fist. It was a hand roughened by scrubbing and washing, the hand of someone who worked hard. And it was the gentle hand which healed Alec's own worn-out heart. It wasn't right for the owner of such gentle hands to be locked away inside a lonely shell.

He took her hand—a hand that was a size smaller than Alec's own—slipped his fingers between hers, and held it tightly. A pale gold bracelet shone on her wrist. It was inlaid with a violet stone.

She's worn it all this time.

It had been a sort of one-sided gift, but she was kind enough to wear it like this. That told Alec that though Shiori appeared to have shut herself behind her walls, she wasn't rejecting the connection between them.

The truth was that she wanted to come out from behind those walls. If she didn't, she would never have mentioned wanting a place to belong. Alec felt like he could see her struggling on the other side of that thin wall of ice which seemed to have melted, just a little, and it made his heart ache terribly.

"I won't rush you. And I won't try to force those walls open." He didn't want to wound her further by going too quickly. "But I want to make you feel whole and content, the same way you've filled my heart with warmth."

If he went slowly, filling her heart and warming her, then one day...

Still holding tightly to her hand, Alec gently kissed her lips as she slept. Trying to melt that thin wall of ice, feeling as though he could almost touch it, he kissed her again and again—with all his heart.

5

The next morning, Alec woke to a wonderful smell that tantalized his empty stomach. He got up and stretched. He felt good. The level of warmth in the camp had been perfect for sleeping in, so most of his fatigue was gone. It had been completely different from spending the night by an open fire wearing many layers of clothing. Plus, there was hot, delicious food. Shiori's work really

was tremendously effective.

Alec folded his blanket and packed it in his knapsack, then he dressed, and equipped himself lightly. The moment he stepped out of the tent, Rurii came up to him. A tentacle snaked upwards to greet him.

“Morning, Rurii.”

After Alec had returned its greeting, the slime bounced once, then returned to its master. It was quite a polite slime. Alec wondered if familiars tended to take after their masters.

“Good morning,” said Shiori.

“Morning.”

Shiori paused in her cooking, filled a small washbasin she had beside her with water, and offered it to Alec. The water was meant for washing his face, and when Alec looked closely, he could see faint wisps of steam rising from it. Apparently, the water was warm. The meticulous nature of Shiori’s consideration for him made him happy.

“Thanks.”

As Alec took the basin and towel, he sneaked a stealthy glance at Shiori’s face. The hollowness he’d seen the night before had receded, and in its place was her usual smile.

You cover it up with that smile, don’t you?

Alec’s heart ached with a faint, but sharp, pain. His hand moved before he realized it. Shiori looked surprised as he patted her dark hair.

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

“Just...because. I wanted to pat your head.”

“And what is that about?” Her smile was wry, but she didn’t push his hand away.

After they’d sated their appetites with a hot breakfast, Alec readied the campsite for them to leave while Shiori cleaned up. He took down the tents and bundled them up, then pulled up the barrier stakes and packed them in his

knapsack. As soon as the barrier came down, cold air swept through the campsite, making Alec shrink back involuntarily.

“I feel like if I get too used to the way things are with you around, I’ll never be able to go back to the way I used to camp.”

Even the harshness of winter camping could be made so much more comfortable just by having Shiori there. Alec had heard that there were no few parties who wanted her to join them. Some actually had asked her, but Shiori stubbornly refused to agree. That incident had truly scarred her. And because everyone understood that, no one could be very insistent in inviting her. She would only join a party for a single occasion, or when the Guild instructed her to.

“I’m glad you think so highly of me, but that’s a bit of a problem. Shall we increase the number of housekeeping mages?”

“Even if we did, I don’t think there are many who can do the work as well as you.”

“Your praise is more than I deserve.”

Alec spoke honestly of how he felt, and Shiori’s expression showed a mix of delight and bewilderment.

As they walked, they spoke a little here and there about nothing in particular.

Since the larger main roads had the same kind of magical-beast-repelling technique applied to them as the barrier stakes, small magical beasts, as well as some of the medium-sized ones, never came close to it. Travelers, carts, and the like could pass along the roads in relative safety. It was a relief to not have to constantly be on guard against magical beasts, though the creatures didn’t often approach places with lots of people, like towns and the main roads.

Alec looked up at the sky and saw that it was very clear, which was unusual for the time of year. The color wasn’t as deep as it was in summer, but the light, watery blue of the sky was very gentle. With this weather, they’d reach their destination before noon. The Blue Forest was near at hand.

“Now that I think of it, what will you do about your other requests? You took

on several more at the same time, didn't you?"

"I plan to take care of them after we've finished Rurii's business."

Alec had intended for his answer to be a casual one, but after a moment of silence, for some reason, Shiori gave a little laugh. Her smile startled Alec.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I was just happy you referred to it as Rurii's business instead of mine."

Rurii bounced once at their feet.

Shiori explained that Rurii was happy about being accepted as an individual. Often, familiars were seen only as their masters' belongings, and that had been frustrating for the slime.

"The truth is...we don't have a magic contract between us. If people thought that I was letting a magical beast roam free, it would cause problems, so for outward appearances I make things work by calling Rurii my familiar."

That made sense. Alec nodded. "It's no wonder. I thought Rurii didn't seem very subservient, and that must be why."

Generally, strong individual specimens or members of rare species were chosen as familiars, and forming a contract was a defensive measure against others who might try to snatch them away. But it wasn't unusual for those who disliked the master-servant relationship to forgo making a contract and simply keep a magical beast at their side.

"I owe my life to Rurii. Rurii is a precious friend who stays by my side. I don't want to do something that amounts to forcing a friend to be subordinate to me."

"That reasoning is very like you." So she wanted the slime to be with her as a friend, on equal ground. "A friend, huh?"

A younger brother who was like a good friend. An older friend who was like a big brother. Contemporaries with whom he'd kept company for a long time. Alec pictured each of their faces in his mind, and then had a sudden thought. He wanted to ask her something. If he asked, would she answer?

“If Rurii is your friend, then what about me? What am I to you?”

“What?”

The words, which had rushed from his mouth as he was unable to suppress his desire to know, made Shiori’s eyes fly wide open.

“What are you to...?”

Her mouth opened a little, then closed again, and she kept repeating the motion as though she had no idea what to say. Though they’d become closer, they’d first met only a little over two months ago. Perhaps the question was a difficult one for her to answer.

Alec spoke first. “I think of you as a precious and irreplaceable companion.”

Companion. In time, he wanted to become more than that, but right now he just wanted to put all of his feelings into those words—precious and irreplaceable—to let her know that she was more important to him than anything else in the world, that nothing could ever take her place.

“I,” Alec began, before amending his words to, “We...think of you as our companion. That’s why we want you to rely on us more. You’re making Zack feel lonely, you know. He says you don’t ever turn to him for help.”

Shiori stared at him, wide-eyed. A slight hint of joy lit her face, but her gaze turned slowly downward as her lips curved in a strained smile.

“I don’t know how to rely on him. I’ve forgotten how.”

Now it was Alec’s turn to stare, wide-eyed.

“‘Forgotten how’...? You...”

“Alec, do you know how my brother came to take me under his care?”

“To a certain extent.” Was she planning to tell him something? He wanted to know anything she was willing to share with him.

“In the beginning, I didn’t know anything, so all I could do was rely on Zack, who had saved me. He’s such a kind and generous person. And Clemens and Nadia, who are very close to him, were considerate of me in lots of different ways. Thanks to them, I managed to create a sort of foundation for my life here,

but...”

Alec thought he felt her words trembling around the edges. At her feet, Rurii seemed worried, as though the slime had sensed the tremors of her heart.

“There were some who did not think well of this. They said that I was too reliant on Zack and the others for a grown adult, and warned me that I should make myself independent. And I thought the same. No matter how insecure I might feel, it was disgraceful for a woman of my years to be completely dependent on someone else.”

She explained that this was why she’d put even more effort into trying to become independent.

“But—and it was only after I’d gotten used to my life here that I realized—after thinking on it, I saw that their words hadn’t been warnings. They’d been snide remarks born of jealousy. Both Clemens and my brother are popular with women, so others probably didn’t like seeing some newcomer being so familiar with them. And there were suspicions that I was trying to get close to Zack by playing the victim, after failing to make a life for myself as an immigrant.”

As she spoke so plainly, her voice was very calm.

“And there was so much I didn’t know about the customs of this land, so I had no choice but to comply when things were pointed out to me. I think it must have been very convenient for those who...wanted me to do as they said. I was told that relying on a man who wasn’t my fiancé was something a vulgar prostitute might do, so I stopped. When I was told to cease being friendly with those of a higher rank than myself because it looked like I was flirting with them, I did. The idea of being shunned by everyone, making it difficult for me to stay there, was absolutely terrifying for me, as I had nowhere else to return to. I didn’t want people to hate me, so I devoted everything I had to doing exactly as others said, and ended up becoming subservient.”

Those people who had wanted her to do as they told her... They’d taken advantage of her. In order to separate her from those she was close to and turn her into someone who would do anything they said, they’d fanned the flames of her fears.

“Even after Rurii saved me and brought me back, I couldn’t stop worrying that

people might think I brought trouble with me. Zack and the others were very considerate of me, but I thought that they were only doing it because they're kind and couldn't help themselves. Now I know that isn't the case, and yet there are still moments when I find myself thinking that way. Perhaps...it's only that they're all such respectable people that they don't show it on the surface, but deep down, they've turned their backs on me. Once I started thinking that way, I stopped being able to bring anything up myself. And while all of that was going on, I lost sight of how to rely on others."

Shiori gave Alec a self-deprecating smile.

"Many people have a favorable impression of me, seeing me as an independent person, but the truth is I'm just pretending so that others won't hate me. Even just speaking with you like this makes me feel like I'm trying to curry favor with you. I don't know the proper way to interact with people anymore."

"And that's why," she continued, "I am not someone who deserves to be spoken of as irreplaceable or precious to you, Alec..."

He wasn't able to let Shiori finish the words she'd spoken so simply. It was so terribly painful to see how those malicious phrases spoken under the guise of advice had sealed away her true feelings, preventing her from expressing herself. The binding spell cast by that malice tortured her even now.

Alec pulled her close and held her tightly. Teasing whistles and cheers rose from the others traveling the road they were on, but Alec ignored them all.



“Zack, Clemens, Nadia... They all know how hard you’ve worked. And all of them can easily tell when someone’s got ulterior motives. If people like them accept you, then you’re fine. You’ve helped so many with your work. And...there are those whose hearts you’ve saved too. So, please, don’t look down on yourself like that.”

He gently patted her back, so much smaller and more delicate than his own, to soothe her.

After a brief silence, Shiori spoke. “But I don’t know what to do.”

Her words were as plain and matter-of-fact as ever, but they felt fragile somehow.

Shiori had saved him. Though he hadn’t finished healing, he’d come to believe that his frayed, festering heart could be mended.

That was why...

“That’s something you can remember a little at a time. I’ll help you. No... Please let me help you.”

Shiori had stiffened at being pulled suddenly into an embrace, but now she softened. She stirred in his arms.

“Then...may I ask that of you?” She spoke the words with great reserve.

Had a tiny crack appeared in the thin walls of ice within her heart?

“Of course.”

Alec patted her back reassuringly and smiled at her.

“I will undertake that request.”

Within the circle of his arms, Shiori lifted her head, her eyes wide. Then she burst into a little laugh.

“Then what shall we do about the reward?”

“The reward, huh?” Alec laughed, finding himself just a little bit amused. “If you’re all right with me deciding, then let’s see. I’ll take half in advance. The second half...I’ll tell you what it is once the request has been fulfilled.”

“The fact that you won’t tell me until things are finished is a little bit frightening. What could you possibly be asking for?”

To say “I want all of you” would likely be too great a thing to ask as a reward. But if he earned her trust as they worked through this request together, he could slowly, carefully increase the amount of the reward he asked for.

“Then what about your advance?”

“My advance will be...”

When Alec told her what he hoped to receive as his advance, Shiori’s eyes grew even wider. Seeing the confusion that followed, and the way her face slowly reddened, Alec smiled as if he were very pleased with himself.

Chapter 3: Closing the Distance

1

The village of Brovito lay along the main road which led from the regional capital, Tris, toward the western parts of the kingdom. And the entrance to the Blue Forest was very close to the village.

It was a forest of snowtrees. Also known as *sune vito*, snowtrees didn't freeze even in the deepest cold, giving off a fresh, vibrant radiance instead. Their thick, snow-white leaves were covered in fine, soft hairs which made it look as though they'd been touched by frost, and their trunks were mantled in heavy white bark that peeled off in scalelike patterns. Even the undergrowth sparkled with a brilliant whiteness. The vast forest of snowtrees cast a pale bluish shadow in the soft northern sunlight, which was how it came to be called the Blue Forest. It was a wondrous place, like something from a fairy tale, and it was a well-known sightseeing spot in the northern part of the kingdom.

"Where do we go from here?"

As they walked down the path that led through the forest, they saw other travelers here and there. All of them were surprised by the slime bouncing along the path, but when they saw a woman who looked like a mage beside it, they all understood, realizing that the slime must be a familiar.

"After we've walked another fifteen minutes or so down this path, we will leave the trail and enter the...we'll head into the forest. And then we will follow Rurii who will lead us to our destina— Take us where we want to go... Ohhh!"

"Pfft... Ha ha ha!"

"Please, don't laugh at... Don't laugh!"

Watching Shiori desperately try to change the way she spoke was so funny, Alec couldn't help laughing aloud. Blushing with embarrassment, Shiori turned her head to the side. In an attempt to appease her, Alec put a hand to his

mouth, trying to hold his laughter back, but even that didn't stop it.

What Alec had asked for as his advance payment was for Shiori to change her tone with him. She spoke familiarly with Zack and Nadia and a few others, but with him she was always as polite and formal as if she were talking to a stranger. When Alec had told her that her tone made him feel lonely, she'd looked utterly lost, a combination of perplexed and bashful. But the fact that she was trying so hard at something she wasn't used to made Alec happy.

"Sorry. You were so adorable I couldn't help it."

"A-Adorable...? The fact that you can say something like that to a woman so easily means that you must be quite the ladies' man. I had thought you were...I thought you'd be more reserved in your relationships."

"It's not like I say it to just anyone, you know. And...oh, right. Shiori."

"Yes...?"

Her face still held a trace of her blush as she looked over and narrowed her eyes at him. Alec laughed. What he was about to say was sure to send her into another panic.

"No more titles. No more formality. Say my name the way you'd say a friend's."

"Of cour— What?"

Just as Alec had expected, Shiori regarded him with a great deal of suspicion. She pressed one hand to her cheek, then, still unsettled, she fiddled with her black hair. Alec had thought that she was a woman whose emotions didn't have great ups and downs, but it might just be that she'd restrained her expressions so as not to create more trouble than necessary in a country she was unfamiliar with. The thought made Alec's heart ache, but he didn't let it show on his face.

"Now, try saying it. Call my name."

"Um..."

Her gaze wavered with uncertainty as Alec encouraged her.

"A-Alec..."

Shiori's voice was little more than a whisper, but she said it just as he'd asked.

"One more time."

"Alec."

This time it was clear and definite.

Changing the way she spoke to him was such a small thing, but Alec felt like the distance between them had closed a little more. Not bad. He couldn't stop himself from smiling.

"I confirm receipt of my advance payment. I ask that you continue to speak to me in this manner."

Seeing Shiori's face redden again, Alec laughed.

And now, if she would only reveal more of her innermost thoughts to him and let him see all of her expressions...

Rurii had pulled a little bit ahead of Alec and Shiori, but the slime stopped at a certain spot and bounced up and down. That must be where they needed to leave the path and push their way into the forest.

There was a barrier along the path that kept magical beasts away, but once they left the trail, they would be outside of its effect. The forest wasn't all that perilous unless a person traveled into its depths, but of the magical beasts that occasionally came close to human settlements, many, such as snow wolves, were dangerous. It never hurt to be careful. Alec stayed alert to any abnormalities in their surroundings as he followed Rurii. Walking beside him, Shiori was watchful too, using her search magic to stay on guard.

"Won't you get tired?" he asked.

"If this is all, I'll be fine."

"All right. Don't push yourself."

"I won't. Thanks."

She seemed to have grown much more comfortable talking to him in a casual manner because her words came very fluidly now. Things were headed in a

good direction.

They must have walked for about thirty minutes. Then Rurii began to seem excited and picked up its pace.

“They’re coming to greet us,” whispered Shiori.

“Greet us?”

Alec knew that, through her search magic, Shiori had a better grasp of what lay ahead than he did. In a flash, Rurii transformed from a domed shape to a mucilaginous one. The slime picked up speed and slithered smoothly forward. Alec and Shiori broke into a trot to keep up. Up ahead, Alec could sense multiple presences. He had just put his hand to the hilt of his magic sword when Shiori stilled his movement.

“I think they’re probably Rurii’s comrades, so don’t show any signs of attacking until we’ve confirmed what’s over there.”

Alec paused a moment before speaking. “I see. Understood.”

Rurii disappeared into some bushes at the end of the trackless path as though it had been sucked in. Alec and Shiori followed after it, pushing their way through the brush.

“This...is...” The sight that spread before Alec’s eyes rendered him speechless.

Blue, green, peach, yellow, orange, aqua... Gathered there in the clearing between the trees was a rainbow of slimes. And then, a slime the color of ruri stones dove in and joined them. It was like paints of many colors had been splashed over a pure white canvas—a brightly colored spectacle that hurt the eyes just a little.

“Incredible. Are we all right with this many of them?”

Alec didn’t say what, exactly, he meant by that, but Shiori seemed to understand.

“I think we’ll be all right. Probably. They didn’t attack us last time, and when I did some research, there weren’t any stories about them attacking people or livestock in the village or in the forest. There were only a few eyewitness reports and all they said was that the slimes had been spotted.”

“I see.”

“Maybe it’s because they’re Rurii’s friends, but they seem gentle. I don’t get a bad feeling from them.”

“That’s...true.”

As Alec watched Rurii jiggling and bouncing, sliding around happily in a crowd of slimes, he fell silent, filled with an indescribable feeling. When he looked more closely, he spotted a few slimes that were the same ruri stone blue as Rurii. He wondered if they were family. Slimes reproduced by division, so Alec had no idea if they had the concept of family, but slimes were said to move alone, and here they were in a huge swarm. That in itself was difficult to believe. Ever since Alec had met Shiori and Rurii, they’d shown him that there were many more things in the world than he’d ever imagined, things which couldn’t be comprehended solely through the common knowledge that he possessed.

After a short time watching in silence, Alec asked the question that suddenly occurred to him. “Just wondering—how long is this going to last?”

“Probably all night. So we’ll be staying here today.”

“I...I see.” It wasn’t as though the question, *In the middle of a pack of slimes?*, never crossed his mind, but Alec didn’t ask it aloud.

There was still a lot of time before sunset, but if that was how things were going to go, then there wouldn’t be any harm in starting to set up camp. Shiori had already unpacked her bags. After a glance at the merrily playing slimes, Alec unpacked his own bags and pulled out the barrier stakes.

The forest floor was relatively flat, making it perfect for a campsite. Laying a waterproof cloth and furs over the undergrowth of soft silvergrass made a very comfortable cushion for sitting on. Still keeping an eye on their surroundings, Shiori and Alec sat down and took a rest. They had a light meal and drank a hot herbal tisane which Shiori had prepared.

Other than stopping by a few times to beg for water, Rurii spent all its time with its comrades. And some of those slimes had appeared very curious about

Alec and Shiori. The slimes had drawn very close, but they didn't come inside the barrier. Alec wasn't actually sure if they *didn't* come inside or if they *couldn't* come inside, but he did understand that they were gentle.

Shiori sat staring vaguely toward Rurii and the others, still holding her unfinished drink in her hands. Her eyes were terribly hollow as she gazed not at the scene before her, but at something very far away. Alec wondered if she were thinking about her distant homeland. Zack had been right. She did seem to be growing unstable.

"Do you want to return to your homeland?"

There was a lull before Shiori responded. "What?"

Life returned to her hollow eyes and she looked over at him. Her mouth opened slightly, as if she wanted to say something. But she didn't answer his question. Instead, after a brief time had passed, she returned it with one of her own.

"Where is your homeland, Alec? Is it in this area?"

"I was born and raised in Tris. It was only me and my mom, but she died when I was nine and after a brief stay in an orphanage, I stayed in my father's home until I came of age. Then... Well, I've been in Tris ever since."

"I see."

Alec heard Shiori whisper that it must be nice for both Alec and Rurii that their homelands were so close.

"Is yours far?"

His question made her eyes tremble with a mysterious emotion.

"It's very far, in a place that's forever out of my reach. That's why I can't go back."

Her face was calm. Only her eyes looked terribly sad.

"You were born in the east, weren't you? One day, let's try going there together." Those spontaneous words flew from Alec's mouth.

He'd heard that the country she'd been born in couldn't be found on the map.

But Shiori herself said she was of the Eastern peoples. And her features were certainly Eastern. It might be that the place simply wasn't indicated on their maps, but if they traveled to the east and looked, surely she'd be able to find it.

Shiori's mouth half opened, as though she were going to say something, but no words came out. After a little while, she gave Alec a resigned smile.

"It isn't a place we can travel to, so it's all right. I'm sorry to refuse when you've taken the trouble to invite me."

Since she'd apologized first, Alec didn't have any way to continue the conversation. It had been a gentle rejection. Alec felt that somewhere, in some unseen place, a door had quietly closed.

This really isn't going to be easy, is it...?

There were so many things that were still unknown about Shiori and her past. Knowing Zack, he'd probably done an exhaustive investigation, but in the end, he hadn't been able to discover a single thing. Shiori herself didn't seem to want to speak about it. It was easy to surmise that the fleeting fragility he occasionally sensed from her likely had something to do with her homeland.

A place that's forever out of her reach, a place she can't travel to, was it?

Had her country fallen into ruin? If so, it would be incredibly difficult to investigate. But...

Her words had been like a riddle tinged with a sense of understanding and acceptance. She was looking for a place to belong because she had nowhere to return to. Then, if her homeland *were* within her reach? If it was somewhere she could travel to, would she go back?

Would she...leave him?

Just the thought of it made his heart hurt as though it had been stabbed.

I don't want that. Don't leave me. Please stay here. Stay with me...

He wanted her to stay with him always.

Alec knew it wasn't something that was in any way appropriate to say to a woman grieving the fact that she couldn't go home, but that was the selfish wish he held inside him—and he'd only just realized it. Even as he'd said things

that had been for Shiori's sake, like wanting to be a place where Shiori belonged, or wanting to help heal her wounds, his true motive had simply been that he wanted her by his side. And now he realized how despicable and wretched that proved him to be.

I really am such an idiot.

Nothing would be changed by this, nothing of what had passed between Alec and those who had once hurt him. Not one thing.

"I am here beside you."

She had spoken kind words to him and had behaved in a way that truly seemed as though it had been for Alec's benefit, but the truth was that that woman had only been motivated to stay with him out of a potential benefit to herself. And that was never going to change one single bit.

"Oh dear. Why is it that you're the one who looks like you're about to cry, Alec?"

Shiori's smile was a little strained as she reached out to touch Alec's cheek. Her hand was so gentle.

Alec took a moment before speaking. "You're such a kind person. Not like me."

"That's not true. You are very kind, Alec."

No. This wasn't kindness. He was only being selfish...

The hand that had touched his cheek moved past the nape of his neck to the back of his head. Shiori quietly drew him toward her. She held him gently to her chest as though she were cradling a little child and patted his head soothingly.

"Alec, you told me not to look down on myself, but it's you who shouldn't look down on yourself."

Her fingers combed softly through his chestnut brown hair.

"It's because you hold tightly to my hand that I feel like I am really here. You—with your hands that serve as an anchor for my uncertain existence—are very kind."

Slowly, hesitantly, Alec wrapped his arms around Shiori. He could feel the heat of her body. She was so warm. And though she described her own existence as uncertain, she was definitely here. Here...beside him.

“Is it all right...for me to be an anchor for you?”

Alec thought he heard her whisper—*You already are*. He wanted to believe that it hadn’t been an imagining born of his own desires.

2

“It’s so late.”

As she walked toward home at a pace so quick it was nearly a trot, Shiori checked the time on her smartphone. The screen cast a faint illumination over the dim street with its few streetlights. The time indicated by the digital numbers showed it was late enough that, in just a few more minutes, the date would change over.

She hadn’t had dinner yet, but making something would be too much work. There was a convenience store up ahead—she’d buy something there.

Closing her phone cover with a snap, she tucked it away in her work bag.

And then...

All of a sudden, her vision distorted. A sensation similar to vertigo made Shiori stop in her tracks and shut her eyes tightly. She didn’t think she pushed herself too hard that often, but ever since she’d left her mid-twenties behind, she found it harder and harder to recover from exhaustion. For a while, she endured the dizziness, but when it felt like even the ground beneath her feet began to reel, she let out a small groan.

The ground twisted and flexed, causing her to sway violently. In the next moment, she felt as if she were floating, like the street had disappeared from under her.

“Oh...”

The instant she realized she was going to fall, a crushing torrent of immense energy crashed down on her—and her consciousness was swallowed by

darkness.

“____, ____, ____.”

Shiori thought she heard someone speaking as her consciousness quietly surfaced. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Her gaze leapt to the unfamiliar ceiling made of wooden boards. There was a faint, earthy scent too. She looked around, unable to grasp her situation. There were plain, clean walls, painted white, and glass windows set in wooden frames. The glass was that retro kind with the irregularities and ripples that could often be seen in old houses. If she wasn't mistaken, it was called Taisho glass...

“____, ____?”

Shiori was startled by a voice that suddenly came from very nearby. She turned to look and found a man with hair the fiery red of a sunset looking down at her. He looked like an actor in a movie from the West, with deeply chiseled features that exuded a wild sexual allure. Shiori thought he was probably in his mid-thirties. He was clearly not Japanese. The scars that peeked out from under the loose collar of his shirt and the cuffs of his sleeves made Shiori's breath catch in her throat. And when she looked closer, the clothes that the man wore seemed to be from some other country...or rather, calling them unreal may have been closer to the mark. His shirt of unbleached cloth and charcoal gray vest were one thing, but the sword that hung at his waist... Even to Shiori's untrained eyes, it looked like something that had been well-used. And the sturdy leather boots that reached up to his knees had just the kind of look that you'd expect in something from the Middle Ages in Europe. No matter how she looked at them, they were not normal clothes.

Now that she thought about it, her own clothes had been changed to something like a hospital gown. The suit she'd been wearing was nowhere to be seen.

What on earth is going on...?

Shiori sat up, still trying to sort out what had happened to her. Everything spun as she was struck by a light dizziness. The red-haired man quietly placed his hand on her back to help steady her.

“Thank you very much.”

When Shiori thanked him, the man looked confused. Apparently, he didn’t understand her language. A nebulous sort of fear flitted through her heart. A man who was clearly a foreigner and didn’t understand her language, a man dressed in a way that was not normal—and she was alone with him in a room she’d never seen before, for reasons she didn’t know.

Shiori desperately tried to comprehend her situation. That’s right. She’d been on her way home from work. Suddenly, she’d been struck by a terrible dizziness and she’d probably collapsed. If that were true, then had this man taken her under his care? Instead of being carried off in an ambulance, this foreign man had brought her somewhere?

Here in this antiquated-looking room, the man looked like someone who might appear in one of those novels set in another world that were so popular with young people these days. Maybe he was part of a theater troupe and this was one of their sets? Even so...the man’s sword, with its grim sense of being frightfully well-used, and the easy way the man wore it as though he’d put it on a great many times before, bothered her. A lot of detail had been put into that prop. And if the theater troupe was domestic, it was strange that the man couldn’t understand her. Perhaps he hadn’t been in Japan for very long.

“_____?”

The man spoke again. Shiori still couldn’t catch what he was saying. It was a language she’d never heard before. She wasn’t proficient in the study of foreign languages, but even she could tell it wasn’t English. That nebulous fear she’d felt earlier made its presence known as an oppressive weight on Shiori’s chest.

“_____, _____, _____.”

The man said something, then turned and walked out the door. Shiori could hear several voices having a conversation beyond the door, which had been left slightly ajar. Before long, the man returned accompanied by two others. One was a young man wearing something that looked a little like a white lab coat, and the other was a beautiful woman with reddish-blond hair, whose clothing was stingy in terms of fabric but generous in terms of exposing her magnificently proportioned figure. The man in the white coat aside, the woman

looked like someone who might appear in a fantasy novel.

Perhaps sensing Shiori's anxiety, the woman knelt beside the bed where Shiori lay and took her hand, as if to reassure her. The red-haired man sat on a stool beside them. He seemed to be watching her closely, making it impossible for Shiori to settle down. Perhaps the woman noticed Shiori's reaction, because she turned an accusing gaze on the man. The man's expression instantly turned self-conscious, and his eyes wavered. Somehow, Shiori understood that these two were not bad people. But it didn't mean she felt any sense of relief.

"_____."

The man in the white coat spoke in a soft voice and took Shiori's hand. She thought he must be a doctor or something. He pressed his fingers to her arm and took her pulse, then felt the nape of her neck to check her temperature, and carefully examined her eyes and mouth.

Soon, the man gave her a gentle smile. Apparently, Shiori's medical exam was finished. She couldn't understand anything he said, but she could tell from his smile and the calm, kind tone of his voice that he hadn't found any issues.

After a brief silence, the beautiful woman pointed at her own face and murmured something.

"What?"

"Nadia."

Shiori gazed fixedly at the woman, trying to grasp her intentions. The woman repeated herself. And, sure enough, she once again pointed at her own face.

"Na-di-a."

"...nadia?"

When Shiori repeated the word, the woman broke into a satisfied smile. Next, the red-haired man pointed at his own face and spoke.

"Zack."

"...zack?"

The man's expression had been a mix of concern and wariness, but now he

gave her a smile that was like a burst of sunlight. Shiori had the sudden thought that it was probably this expression that showed who this man truly was.

Then she realized what they were trying to do. Nadia. Zack. Those were probably their names. Next was the man in the white coat's turn.

"Nils."

"...Nils?"

Shiori thought she remembered a story where a hero with that name did great things. She looked into the face of the man who called himself Nils and he nodded with a quiet smile.

Once they'd all given their names, their gazes concentrated on Shiori. It was as if they were telling her that it was her turn next.

"Shi-o-ri."

Perhaps her name was difficult for foreigners to make out. All three of them had cocked their heads to the side.

"Shi-o-ri. Shiori."

"Shi-ou-ry."

"Shi-o-ri."

"...Shi-ori?"

Once Shiori had corrected them a few times, they got the pronunciation right, and she nodded at them.

After their quick introductions of simply stating their names, Zack handed Shiori a folded piece of paper. It seemed to be an old, well-used map. Shiori spread the map on the comforter to look at it—and the fantastical notion she'd had, one she'd decided couldn't possibly have actually happened, began to take on a sense of reality. As Shiori took it all in, her whole body tensed.

She'd never seen any of it before. She wasn't familiar with any of the terrain or geography on the world map.

Shiori felt the blood drain from her face, and she was pretty sure it wasn't just her imagination.

Zack pointed at the center of the map, at the middle of a continent whose shape was completely unfamiliar to Shiori. It was an area at a relatively high latitude. Probably about the same as Hokkaido, or maybe a little higher than that.

“Storydia.”

That was probably the name of the country Shiori was currently in, but she’d never heard it before. She looked at the map and saw that it was a fairly large country. Given the scale of it, no matter how far the country might be from Japan, it wouldn’t be strange for her to at least recognize its name. But she didn’t. And she’d never heard of it before. The whole map, the shapes of all the landmasses, the terrain, everything... It was all completely different from everything she knew.

Could it be...? But that’s not possible...

An indescribable feeling of agitation made Shiori’s breathing ragged. Every breath was shallow and quick. She couldn’t stop shaking.

Seeing Shiori’s confusion and anxiety, Zack pushed the world map toward her. His head tilted slightly as he gave her a questioning look, then he pointed. He appeared to be telling her to indicate her country on the map.

Shiori looked at Zack. She tried to speak and failed. Only a trembling breath escaped her lips. Nadia’s beautiful brows raised. Nils regarded Shiori with a troubled expression. Zack’s gaze transformed into something probing, filled with a sharpness that was ever vigilant.

Shiori checked the map again. Just as she’d expected, she still didn’t recognize any of it. No matter how many times she examined the map, no matter where she looked, she couldn’t find any countries with familiar terrain.

Taking her eyes from the document, she looked toward the window. She could see outside. Shiori pushed the comforter aside and got out of bed. As her whole body wobbled, she pushed herself forward, paying no mind to her stumbling steps.

It must be some kind of elaborate prank. If she could look at what was outside, surely that would prove it.

“___!”

Someone called to her in a pointed voice, as if telling her to stop. Shiori ignored the warning and rushed toward the window. She pressed herself to it and looked out over the scene beyond.

A townscape overflowing with the unfamiliarity of a foreign land sank into a deepening twilight. As the curtain of night descended, the warm-colored illumination of the street lamps rendered the broad street below visible. Horse-drawn carts traveled the street, as well as people dressed in their native garb. Shiori could see some people armed with what looked like swords, staffs, and bows and arrows. The scene was like something out of a fairy tale, but it wasn't fiction—it overflowed with the definite sense that this was simply daily life.

There was a man in the street who looked like a wizard from a picture book. The catlike creature who accompanied him suddenly looked up at Shiori. The animal's snow-white fur was as fluffy as down, and it had two tails that branched from a single spot. Two appendages like vestigial wings lay folded along its back. There was intelligence in its mismatched eyes—one gold and one blue—as its gaze met Shiori's own. And in that moment, its body lifted off the ground.

Shiori let out a silent scream. As she shrank back, all the strength left her body and she lost her balance, swaying violently. She heard a panicked-sounding voice as someone physically supported her, picking her up in their arms. It was the man who had called himself Zack. He carried her, embracing her tightly as she shook so hard that her teeth chattered. He moved her to the bed and tucked her back under the comforter, but even then, her trembling would not stop.

It can't be true.

A language she couldn't understand. People who looked like something out of a story. A map full of unfamiliar terrain. A view of a town straight out of a fairy tale. Animals she'd never seen before... Individually, each of those things pointed to the truth of what had happened to her.

Had she really come to a different world?

It can't be. It's not like this is some cheap novel.

Nadia held Shiori—who was pale and trembling uncontrollably, wrapped warmly in the blanket—and gently stroked her head in a comforting manner. Zack turned his gaze to Nils, who shook his head with a stern expression as if to say that he could not allow any further questioning.

“ __, __, __.”

Zack must have known that Shiori wouldn’t understand his words, yet still he spoke as he softly patted the comforter where she lay. And though some of the previous hardness remained, there was a sense of concern for her in his tone. Even so, Nadia’s gentle hands and the concern of Zack, who probably wasn’t a villain of some kind, were of no comfort to Shiori.

What do I do? What am I supposed to do?

“Shiori.”

Someone called her name. When she looked, Nils smiled with a slightly troubled expression as he held out a cup. He gently pressed it to her lips. The liquid that Shiori swallowed from the cup held a faint sweetness and smelled of earth.

“ __, __.”

After checking to make sure Shiori had drunk it all, Nils gently covered her eyes with his hand. Did that mean that he wanted her to sleep? The liquid she’d been given might have been some kind of medicine. Little by little, her consciousness grew more distant.

That’s right. If she slept, she could forget. She could escape. In fact, she might be able to wake from this nightmare. Thinking these things in a hazy corner of her mind, Shiori sank into slumber.

Shiori woke slowly and blinked, unsure of where she was for a moment. The ceiling of a tent filled her vision.

A dream...

It had been a memory of the day when she’d first fallen into this kingdom four years ago, a memory of the day when all of this had begun.

She quietly sat up. A drop of water slipped from her cheek, leaving a small spot on her blanket. Apparently, she'd been crying.

Naturally, at the time, she hadn't done anything as unseemly as scream and wail. But the shock and the fatigue she'd built up had triggered a fever, and Shiori recalled that she'd been confined to her bed for several days. She'd ended up causing Zack and the others a lot of worry. Shiori had managed to regain her health with a few days' recuperation and Nils's medicinal tisanes. After that, her days of trying to accustom herself to her circumstances began.

Shiori's suit was returned to her, but her work bag was not. She'd tried to ask Zack about it through a conversation of gestures, but as it turned out, he'd taken her into his care with nothing but herself and no other belongings. Had it been left in the spot where she'd fallen into this world, or had it disappeared into some pocket of space-time as she'd been transferred from one place to another? In any case, she had nothing—she didn't understand anything, no one knew her language, and she possessed nothing resembling monetary assets. She hadn't had the time to say, "I'm going to look for a way home." She'd needed to get used to life in this place and to build herself a foundation upon which she could subsist before she could even think of starting anything else.

For four years, she had devoted herself to frantically trying to survive.

Now, though she still felt a sense of nostalgia, she understood that she would never be able to return. No exciting, dramatic tale, like that of a heroine in a novel, would begin. She hadn't been called here with some great duty, and so she had not been bestowed with splendid powers before being left in this place. She'd simply gotten caught in some random fluctuation of space-time and been thrown into this world—that was all.

There might be some spell somewhere that could send her back, but as she had no power, she was neither so young nor so foolish as to go recklessly and haphazardly searching everywhere without a single clue. Depending on the circumstances, it might one day become necessary for her to explain where she had come from. However, she didn't think that anyone would believe something as crazy as the idea of transplantation from another world. It wasn't worth revealing if all it would do was jeopardize the position she'd worked so hard and so desperately to create for herself.

For now, she would stay alive. That was the thought she'd carried with her through her daily life.

I am alive. No matter how uncertain my existence may be, I am breathing here and now. I am alive.

She wiped the other droplets from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

There was a faint rustling of clothes from outside the tent. Alec quietly pulled back the cloth that covered the entrance and poked his head in. He might have sensed the mood inside the tent and come to check on her.

"You're awake," he said.

"Yes," replied Shiori. "Where's Rurii? Still playing?"

"Sleeping with friends over there. It's quite a spectacle. There are puddles of every color."

"Then it's the same as last time. My big brother was surprised too."

"Is that so...?"

Alec's expression was indescribable, subtly complex and conflicted. It was exactly the same expression Zack had shown her last time. That made Shiori laugh faintly, causing Alec to give her a puzzled look.

"Your reaction is just the same as Zack's. I couldn't help myself."

"The same, huh?"

He seemed dissatisfied somehow. Though Alec and Zack were old friends and were very close, being on good terms with each other, it could be that they sometimes clashed as they were both men.

"There's still time before the watch change. You should get a little more sleep."

"Yes."

At Alec's urging, Shiori wrapped herself in her blanket again. Then a hand reached out to touch her cheek.

She looked up, questioningly, and saw a faint furrow between Alec's brows. "What is it?"

“No... It’s nothing.”

Shiori had panicked a little inside, thinking that Alec must have noticed the tracks of tears and was going to ask about them, but he didn’t press her.

His broad palm gently covered her eyes as if to block her view. Shiori could feel his warmth through his hand. And, almost as though it had shown her the way, she began to doze off.

In the midst of that comforting warmth, Shiori thought, *If one day I am able to take this person’s hand...I wonder if that would allow me to put down roots in this place.*

Just as she was drawn into a peaceful sleep, Shiori thought she felt something warm brush gently against her lips.

3

As Alec outfitted himself, Shiori prepared their meal, glancing toward Rurii and the other slimes to see how they were doing. They seemed to be exercising after waking up. The sight of all the slimes imitating Rurii’s supple expansions and contractions made for quite a bizarre spectacle. Shiori didn’t think she was imagining the twitching at the corners of Alec’s mouth.

After a moment, Alec spoke. “If I fell on top of them, I have the feeling I wouldn’t make it out alive.”

Shiori couldn’t help laughing at his quietly muttered words. Though, it was likely true that if they were hostile slimes, anyone dropped on top of them would be swallowed down and dissolved in an instant.

It would seem that magical beasts were just like humans, in that some were gentle and others were ferocious. Rurii and the others were probably the former. Even when they encountered people, they didn’t attack. Shiori couldn’t state definitively that they were absolutely safe to be around, but in her search through several decades of records, she hadn’t seen any reports of slime attacks near the Blue Forest. They must have been living quietly within the woods all that time.

Still watching over the slimes, Shiori and Alec began eating their breakfast.

Possibly out of a completely understandable reticence about the situation, Alec had seated himself in a spot where the slimes were just barely in, or perhaps entirely out of, sight. His face had gone slightly pale as he squirmed and took a bite of his bread.

After a moment, Shiori spoke. "I'm sure that staying in that form must be more natural for Rurii, but..."

"Hm?"

"When we first started living together, that viscous, liquid appearance was just too unsettling."

Alec gave her a strained smile. "I'm sure it must have been."

"So I suggested that whenever it was in front of people, it could take on a cuter appearance, and that's how Rurii became that shape. It's been a huge success. Because of that I've realized just how important physical appearance is."

"Is that so...?" For some reason, Alec's eyes took on a faraway look.

But it was the truth. The moment the slime had assumed a cute, jiggling, bun-like shape, it had become incredibly popular with women and children. Rurii hadn't seemed displeased either, adding diverse variations of jelly-like shaking to its repertoire. The slime used each of them in accordance to the given circumstance, delighting everyone. At this point, it had become a bit of a mascot. And, on that note, she suddenly recalled two men who had patted Rurii quite thoroughly.

Alec and Shiori had just finished breakfast and begun cleaning up when Rurii bounced over and came back inside the barrier. The slime was in its usual bun shape, perhaps out of consideration for Alec.

"Hm? Did you want some water?"

Shiori produced lukewarm water with her magic which the slime happily drank down. Just as she was giving Rurii another serving after the slime had begged for it, she heard Alec gasp. He drew his sword from its sheath.

"Shiori!" He shouted her name as a warning.

She looked behind her and saw slimes crowding around the barrier. Rurii gave a jelly-like shake, as if drawing their attention to something. In response, all the other slimes assumed the same steamed bun shape as Rurii. They began bouncing up and down all at once.

“This is...”

The adorable, ridiculous sight appeared to have dampened Alec’s urge to action and he slowly lowered his sword. He turned his gaze toward Shiori as if asking for help, but she’d never experienced this before either. For the moment, the one thing she did understand was that the slimes didn’t seem to have any hostile intent.

Rurii jiggled as if it wanted to say something.

“Could it be...? Do your friends want water too? Is that it?”

It all looked like Rurii’s usual sort of begging to Shiori. When she asked the slime her question, it gave her a jelly-like jiggle that was probably an affirmative answer.

“Really...? But is that all right, giving them water? Wouldn’t it count as feeding them?”

“I...have no idea...”

There had been incidents where the feeding of adorable magical beasts had resulted in the creatures’ descent upon human habitations, where they then caused disturbances. This precedent meant that Shiori and Alec couldn’t afford to be careless here.

In fact, Rurii’s case was ultimately one where the slime had gotten used to being fed by humans. Fortunately, however, Rurii hadn’t “followed Shiori home” so much as “brought Shiori home,” so everyone had cautiously accepted the slime.

At the time, Shiori hadn’t thought of it as taming something wild by feeding it. The fever she’d had back then had slowed the workings of her mind. She’d been shunned by the others in Akatsuki even as the horrible deterioration of her physical health had made it impossible for her to manage a smile for

politeness's sake. After being told that the sight of her face in that state would make their food taste bad, Shiori had been chased off to a spot away from the others, where she'd be all alone—though they'd still monitored her closely to make sure she couldn't escape.

Afterwards, Shiori had leaned back against a tree and had been taking a little rest. Just then, a ruri stone blue slime had slipped silently from the shade of the pale, bluish-white forest. It seemed interested in the bread which Shiori hadn't been able to eat a single bite of, so she'd said, *"I can't eat it. I'd be grateful if you had it in my place."* Shiori still had a dim memory of that exchange.

The thickly liquid form wriggled, but Shiori was strangely unafraid. When she placed the bread on the ground, the slime had stretched out a tentacle and swallowed it up, dissolving it.

Eating nothing but bread makes your throat dry, doesn't it...?

Since she was having this thought about a slime, it wasn't an observation that made much sense. But even as these vague notions crossed her mind, Shiori had used her magic to create a ball of water, which the slime drank as though it were only a matter of course. Its viscous form gave a jelly-like shake. The movement looked happy to Shiori, and for the first time in a long time her heart felt comforted.

All of the slimes Shiori could see shook like jellies. She felt like they were looking at her expectantly, and it made her feel terribly agitated. Alec appeared to feel the same way.

"I wouldn't mind giving all of them water as long as they don't follow us down to where there are people..."

Rurii bounced up, as if signaling its assent to the condition which Shiori had suggested. The other slimes all began bouncing and jiggling just like Rurii.

"All right. One cup each, then."

Shiori formed a mental image of multiple balls of water floating in the air. She accessed airborne magical essences and, through her magic, materialized the phenomenon she'd seen in her mind. Spheres of water appeared in the air and

lightly floated down to the slimes waiting on the ground. They drank one ball each and then shook like jellies, delighted.

After a moment, Alec said, "I guess I'll help too."

He sighed once, then activated his water magic.

"Water Current, Vaten Flode."

A torrent of water raced across the ground, flowing and forming a tiny river. The slimes gathered around it and began to drink. And sure enough, they all seemed happy.

Rurii watched for the moment when its friends had finished drinking all the water, then pawed at Shiori's feet, as if prompting her.

"Are you sure you're done? You're ready to go back?"

Rurii bounced. Apparently, its visit home had come to an end. The moment this was confirmed, Alec let out a relieved sigh. Shiori couldn't help laughing at his reaction.

"I'm sorry. I seem to have caused you a lot of mental fatigue."

"No. Sorry, that wasn't intentional. You've given me a...very unique experience." Alec's considerate reply was accompanied by a strained smile.

They folded up the tents, pulled up the barrier stakes, and packed their knapsacks. As they were preparing to depart, Rurii appeared reluctant to part with its friends. It looked as though the slimes were conversing with each other in bounces and jiggles.

With all their preparations complete, Shiori called out to Rurii. "Well then, shall we go?"

Rurii bounced. The slime slid away from the swarm and took up a position between Shiori and Alec. With slimes of many colors there to see them off, the two humans and one slime set off. After they'd gone a little ways, Shiori looked back and saw the domed slimes return to their viscous, fluid forms one by one, before disappearing between the trees and into the bushes. Rurii turned toward its friends and bounced. Shiori was sure it must be a gesture of farewell.

"It's sort of... I mean, it's really interesting. Rurii is just like a person."

The slime's mannerisms and the way it behaved... Alec sounded deeply intrigued as he murmured these words.

"I've asked others who have familiars and apparently they're all like this."

To begin with, familiars were individuals who were able to live among humans without feeling out of place. It was said that those who could become familiars, and those who shared their lineage, were all very like humans in a way—intelligent, friendly, and good-natured.

"If you asked, I think you could have a slime as a familiar too, Alec."

"Rurii is more than enough slime for me all on its own."

Shiori had said it jokingly, and Alec had replied with a completely straight face. Rurii reached out a tentacle and slapped at Alec's legs, as if to ask if there was something in particular Alec wanted to complain about.

The familiar's homecoming had come safely to an end. All that was left was to complete the requests Alec had taken on, and get back to town. Two humans and a slime walked through the pale, bluish-white woods—each wishing that they would be able to make it home without incident.



Side Story: Rurii's Soliloquy

"I'm so sorry, Alec. And when you've only just gotten well."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm doing this because I want to."

Shiori had looked apologetic as she spoke, and Alec replied as he put down the packages he'd been carrying in both hands. His words were probably true. He didn't appear bothered. In fact, he seemed happy.

From time to time, Alec helped her out like this, carrying packages while Shiori shopped. He was usually away on requests, so he didn't do it every time, but he always came to the Guild on days when Shiori sold her portable foods if he was free. After placing his own order, he'd casually kill time, waiting for Shiori to collect all the orders for the next sales day and calculate how much she would need to buy. Then he'd follow along as if it were only natural when she headed out to do her shopping.

At first, Shiori had been hesitant, trying to decline his help in a roundabout sort of way, but Alec let it fly right by him. Lately, Shiori appeared to have given up and decided to just allow herself to presume upon him. Instead of fighting it, Shiori did things to thank Alec for carrying her packages, treating him to tea and sweets or having a meal with him.

Today, it looked like Alec had chosen tea and sweets. After being shown to the dining table, Alec appeared quite accustomed to the situation as he lowered himself into a chair. As he watched Shiori preparing tea, his eyes gently narrowed in a smile.

I looked up at the two of them chatting together in a friendly way, as I splashed in the washbasin which had been set up for me to play in.

In the beginning, the mood between them had been awkward and stilted somehow, but now it was peaceful and soft. Sometimes, as Shiori listened to Alec speak, she laughed. And Alec beamed when he saw her do that.

Hmm... This atmosphere wasn't bad at all.

Alec loves Shiori. And quite a lot, at that.

It seems he had fallen completely in love with her while she was taking care of him, when he was sick and confined to bed. I think it was pretty obvious that he was interested in her before that, but Shiori only noticed recently. And her recognition only went as far as the thought, “Maybe he’s fond of me...?” That part of her is rather unfortunate. She’s so alert to any ill will directed at her, but she’s incredibly dense when it comes to any goodwill. She’s so dense that even when someone shows her kindness, she thinks, “Are they just being polite?”

But, in spite of all of that, Shiori seems to like Alec. That’s a result of the effort Alec has put in.

I hope it all works out well for them.

I’ve heard that Shiori has gone through a lot of hardship and suffering. So I want her to be happy enough to make up for all of that.

I don’t know many details about what Shiori went through before I knew her.

But it’s true that when we first met, she didn’t seem very happy. At the time she was sick with a fever, but the people who appeared to be her companions treated her so terribly that even I, a magical beast, could tell.

That day, I had a feeling something good was going to happen. I was creeping around the forest when I met Shiori, who was crouched at the base of a tree. She looked so sick that sitting was probably the most she could do, but when she noticed me, she gave me some tasty-looking bread. And then she made water with her magic for me. That water was so sweet and delicious, I took a liking to it with my very first sip.

I felt like she might be someone I could get along with, and her water was tasty, so I wanted to be friends, but it didn’t seem like the right time for something like that. I gave up on it for the moment, and left her there.

But I was worried about her somehow, so I followed her in secret.

Thinking back on it now, I’m really glad I followed her. I mean, I’d never imagined that they’d force someone as sick as her to go into a labyrinth and then leave her inside.

She's your companion and you're just going to leave her behind?! Even magical beasts treat their compatriots a little better than that, you know?! A bunch of you are really big, and yet not one of you is going to carry her out?! ...Those were the thoughts I had at the time. I was extremely shocked.

And later, when I heard what Zack and the others had to say, I was even more shocked. Apparently, Shiori had nearly been murdered. That's likely why she'd been taken into the labyrinth.

Oh, and that's why they'd said what they'd said back then...

"We were told to deal with her."

"But to go that far seems a little..."

"If we just leave her like this..."

"That's true. If we do that, she'll die eventually."

...it was all very clear—the meaning of the conversation those people had had, and the reason they'd taken pretty much everything Shiori had carried with her.

Those people hadn't needed her any more, so they'd cast her aside, but I'd wanted to become her friend. If she died, I'd feel lonely and sad, so I decided to help her. But, since she seemed to be sick, I knew that as a magical beast I wouldn't be able to save her on my own.

At any rate, if I got her to a human town, things would probably work out somehow. I thought about going to nearby Brovito, but I'd learned from listening to those people talk that they'd come from Tris. So, if I was going to take her somewhere, I thought Tris would be best.

I knew that, while there were bad people among humans, there were far more good people. After all, magical beasts are like that too. That's why I thought that if I went to Tris, there might be people there who would be worried about Shiori.

I popped Shiori inside my body so that she wouldn't be cold, and carried her to Tris. It was kind of far, but I really did my best. Along the way, I nearly got attacked by other magical beasts a bunch of times. When they said things like,

“If you’re not going to eat that human, give it to me,” I hurriedly declined. It was hard, but my fellow slimes who had tagged along half in jest helped out. They really saved me.

When we first arrived in Tris, the knight who’d been guarding the gate had been really surprised, shouting, “Is that a person being eaten?!”

But thanks to Shiori, who worked really hard to explain things to them, I wasn’t killed. And they immediately took her to a place where she could get medical treatment.

Lots of her friends came to see her. There were three who seemed closest to her—Zack, who was half-crazed as he hugged her, and Clemens and Nadia, who both secretly cried behind her back. They all nursed her back to health, making sure that she was never left alone.

I could tell that everyone really cared about her.

Bringing her to Tris had been the right thing to do.

And yet...

Even though she had so many friends, Shiori seemed lonely somehow.

Zack, Clemens, and Nadia were all really friendly with her, but they were also somewhat restrained toward her. And Shiori was holding herself back from them for some reason too. It was frustrating because it was like there was a thin wall between them.

It felt like Zack and Clemens actually loved Shiori so much that each of them wanted to be her paired mate. And I thought that if one of them did pair with her, then Shiori might not feel so lonely.

But neither of them showed any of that in their actions. That’s why Shiori didn’t notice. I thought that it might be better if they displayed more obvious courtship behavior, like that of magical beasts, but each of them once told me of their feelings in secret.

“She nearly died and I didn’t notice. I couldn’t protect her. How could I possibly have the nerve to tell her I love her now, after all of this?”

Would that really be a problem? I had the sense that Zack was the person Shiori trusted the most, so if he'd told her his feelings, I think she'd have been happy. Humans are complicated.

And Clemens was the same, even though he was just as close to Shiori as Zack was.

"I was happy just watching over her. I wanted to protect her as much as I could, so that nothing untoward ever happened to her again. I'd thought that was enough for me, but... Yes, that's right. I'm an idiot. When I saw her beginning to open her heart to Alec, I realized for the first time—I love her."

Apparently, he hadn't noticed his own feelings. I felt even more keenly that humans are complicated.

Even Shiori is pretty complicated.

"Right now, I can work like this. My big brother and the others are around, and there are many people who help me. But one day I'll be alone... And there isn't anything like insurance here, unlike my country, so if I'm ever unable to work because I get sick or injured, that would make things very hard. That's why I have to work and save up now while I can, so that I'll be able to keep on living even when I'm all alone."

She talked as though living alone now and in the future was only natural. The fact that she never seemed to consider that she could ask someone for help made me really sad.

I wondered why that was, when she had so many friends.

At times like these, if I were human, I'd be able to give her some thoughtful and considerate words. But since I'm a magical beast and can't speak, there are limits to how much I can console her.

Oh, it's so frustrating!

Still...

"Thanks. Those baked sweets were delicious."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you. You've been so helpful."

With teatime over, Alec stood. It looked like he was already leaving. I thought it would be better if he stayed longer, but Alec was probably being considerate of Shiori in his own way.

But even so...

“Shiori.”

As they parted, Alec turned back at the door, gently embraced Shiori, and kissed her cheek. I saw Shiori stiffen in surprise. Alec saw it too and laughed. He patted her gently on the head and left.

I saw him off with a wave of a tentacle. Then, moving away from the washbasin where I'd been playing, I approached Shiori.

When I looked up at her, Shiori was bright red. She seemed troubled, but also somehow happy. And, probably unconsciously, she stroked the bangle on her left wrist that Alec had given her the other day.

Yup. The atmosphere between them wasn't bad at all.

There were some like Zack and Clemens who had given up for their own reasons. There were others who wanted to be Shiori's paired mate, but unfortunately none of them were any good at all. Whether they were too solicitous of Shiori, or not solicitous enough, all of them were failures.

But Alec was different.

I bounced over to the window and clambered up to look outside. When I did, I saw Alec about to head home, looking up toward me.

He often gazed up at the room like that. Even when he hadn't made plans to see Shiori, he'd stand there for a little while, looking up at her window. Then he'd suddenly smile, very gently, and head off to his own lodgings.

I could see that he truly cared for Shiori from the bottom of his heart, and it made me tremendously happy.

He stayed by her side—caring for her, patiently facing her head on, skillfully closing the distance between them in a way that wouldn't startle her... And even when they were apart like this, he was always thinking of her.

He melted the stubborn places in her heart, making them soft and gentle.

Alec had said he would become the place where Shiori belonged. But he'd also said that she had become the place where he belonged before he could do that. Shiori, who'd lived with the intention that she'd be alone forever, had become a solid foundation for Alec, something he could rely upon. And he'd told her that he wanted to become the same for her.

I'm certain that these two will be all right together. Shiori won't feel so lonely, and she'll come to understand that she isn't alone.

Which is why...

Alec, keep at it so you can hurry up and become Shiori's paired mate!

Side Story 2: A Special Flavor

"Oh, it's no good... I feel like my body's about to run out of Japanese-ness..."

Shiori had been looking through cookbooks on Storydia's local cuisine for the purposes of culinary research, but now she threw herself limply across the couch she'd been sitting on. It happened periodically that she would exhaust her internal supply of Japanese-ness. And when she did, it felt as though her body complained, making its needs known through a subtle ailing feeling. Though that might just have been her imagination.

She sat up, feeling sluggish, and went to rummage through her cold storage and preservation boxes. There were vegetables. And she still had both miso and short-grained rice, which she only used for herself as they were so rarely available. Luckily, she could procure soy sauce by the barrel, so that was all right.

"I want to eat grilled fish... Or simmered fish would be good too..."

But she didn't have the most important ingredient—fish. She did have sardines in herbed oil, but she wasn't in the mood for that. What she wanted was grilled fish, or fish simmered with soy sauce and sugar. A simple grilled fish served with a drizzle of soy sauce. Or, if not that, then a rich and fatty blue-backed fish, simmered in a sweet-salty sauce with a miso or soy sauce base.

Shiori's palate craved a Japanese fish dish.

"Oh...fish...fish..."

For now, she washed some rice and set it aside to soak. Then she went into the bathroom where Rurii was bathing and playing in a tub of warm water, and told the slime that she was going out shopping. She slung her favorite bag over her shoulder and left her apartment, heading for Marius's grocery.

"Fish..."

"Whoa! You scared me!"

Shiori had groaned the word as soon as she opened the door to the shop. This made Marius, who'd been checking a shipment that had just arrived, jump.

"I've just gotten this intense craving for fish... Have you gotten any good fish in?"

"Ah... Your usual flavors-of-home deficiency disease, I see..."

Shiori occasionally staggered into Marius's shop displaying these same symptoms. He gave her a troubled smile.

"It's easy enough to make food from the Empire with what I can procure, but...it's a little harder to make what you're looking for, isn't it, Shiori?"

As Marius was a refugee from the Empire, the taste that reminded him of his mom's home cooking was, of course, cuisine local to the Empire. Unfortunately, the mother who had made those dishes for him had passed away at a young age, and naturally her grave was still back in the Empire. Marius looked a little lonely, but he collected himself and gave Shiori a friendly smile.

"So, fish, was it? What kind did you want?"

"Well... I'd like a fatty blue-backed fish if possible. But if you don't have any, then a river fish..."

"Oh, in that case..."

Marius reached into a nearby wooden crate and pulled out a distinctively speckled fish that gleamed silver. It had just come off a cold storage cart, so it had thawed exactly the right amount. The plump, tender, fatty blue-backed fish

looked delicious.

“Oh, mackerel! I’ll have that, please.”

“Sure thing! Thanks, as always. Every time you come by, I think to myself that I like the way you shop.”

“I try not to compromise when it comes to ingredients.”

“Man... I’m jealous of that lot at the Tris branch. I mean, they get to eat tasty food even when they’re out camping.”

Embarrassed, Shiori laughed a little and said, “You’re much too kind.”

Marius quickly wrapped the mackerel in waxed paper and handed it to Shiori, who smiled a little as she took it.

“Here you go! And thanks for your continued patronage.”

After paying for the fish, Marius saw her off. Shiori beamed happily as she left the shop. She’d gotten her hands on some very nice fish. It was so nice that it would probably be delicious just grilled and eaten with a little soy sauce, but it might be good simmered in a miso sauce too. Making shime saba—raw mackerel cured in sugar, salt, and rice vinegar—would be wonderful, but Shiori was naturally worried about potential parasites, so she’d refrain from making that particular dish.

“Simmered in miso, grilled, simmered in miso... Hmm... Which one should I make?”

As Shiori walked along in high spirits, she bumped into Alec, who was on his way home from work.

“Oh, what’s this? You seem like you’re in a very good mood.”

“Alec.” As Shiori looked up at the tall man, her happiness so overwhelmed her that she ended up grinning foolishly.

Of course, she wasn’t grinning because she’d seen Alec. It was because she’d acquired some very good fish. But Alec’s eyes widened and he flushed a little. Then he mumbled something that sounded like, “She’s so cute...” in a nearly unintelligible murmur.

“Hm? What was that?”

“Oh, um... Nothing.”

Shiori was puzzled for a moment, then spoke. “Oh, I’ve gotten my hands on some very nice fish. Would you like to join me for dinner?”

“You wouldn’t mind? Then I’d love to join you.”

Shiori had been mystified by Alec’s sudden suspicious behavior, but since this sort of opportunity didn’t often arise, she’d tried inviting him, and he’d responded in an encouraging manner.

He accompanied her back to her apartment. Perhaps infected by Shiori’s cheerfulness, Alec seemed to be in a good mood too.

“I’m home!”

As soon as Shiori returned to her rooms, Rurii, now done with its bath, came out to greet her. The slime bounced closer to her and waved a tentacle at Alec in greeting.

“It’s going to take some time to prepare our meal. Would you like to take a bath while you wait?”

“Huh? Um...no, I’m fine. I didn’t get all that dirty today. I’ll just wait here.”

“I see... Well then, I’ll bring out some tea.”

“Thanks. That sounds good.”

Shiori brought out black tea and some light teacakes for him, then returned to the kitchen. She began her dinner preparations with great excitement and didn’t notice Alec’s whispered conversation with Rurii behind her.

“Your master can be a bit careless sometimes, don’t you think? Asking a man to her home and offering dinner and a bath is like an invitation to do much more. But as it’s her we’re talking about, I’m sure there wasn’t any hidden meaning to her words...”

Shiori began by draining the rice, then she put it in a pot, added an appropriate amount of water, and turned on the fire. Freshly cooked rice was essential for fish dishes.

Since Alec was there, Shiori had decided to simmer the fish she'd bought in a miso-based sauce. He seemed to like sweet-salty flavors, so Shiori was certain he'd like this dish.

She laid the fish on her cutting board, and scraped off the thin scales with her knife. Then she cut off its head and slit it open from belly to tail in order to remove the innards. As she was rinsing it in cold water to get it really clean, Rurii slithered over. The slime's objectives were likely the head and guts of the fish. The head would be delicious made into arajiru soup—a soup made of leftover fish scraps—but Shiori decided to let Rurii have it this time. When she told the slime to go ahead and take it as well as the rest of the scraps, Rurii appeared delighted. The slime gave a jelly-like shake before extending a tentacle and smoothly swallowing it all up. Then it went back to stay at Alec's feet.

“Slimes really are incredible...”

The words slipped out of Shiori's mouth in a murmur without her being fully aware of them. Alec, who had been watching from behind, looked a little pale as he nodded once. Shiori saw this and gave him a wry smile as she returned to her work.

After cutting the fish into three pieces—two fillets and the skeleton—Shiori removed the larger rib bones and all the remaining little bones as well, so that it would be easier for Alec to eat. Then she cut the fish into appropriately sized pieces. She set all the bones aside, intending to use them to make stock for the miso soup.

Shiori used her magic to make some boiling water and rinsed the mackerel fillets in it to thoroughly remove any fishy smell. All that was left was to put water in a pot with sake, sugar, soy sauce, and miso, and wait for it to come to a light boil over a medium fire. Once it had, Shiori added the mackerel and thinly sliced ginger. Then she put a lid on the pot to let it all simmer.

I wish I had mirin, but they don't seem to sell sweet rice wine anywhere.

She hoped she'd be able to get her hands on some one day, though. As she thought about these things, she began prepping for the miso soup. She scraped all the unneeded meat and fragments of organs from the bones, and washed

them clean. Then she ran them through boiling water, just as she had with the fillets to get rid of the fishy smell. After that, she put the bones in a small pot and covered them with water. Once they'd boiled for a bit, she skimmed the scum from the top and waited for the bones to release their flavor into the stock.

Shiori didn't forget to check on the mackerel and rice in the meantime.

"I think it might be just about ready."

When the time seemed right, Shiori turned off the heat and strained the stock to remove all the spent bits of bone. She then returned the stock to the pot and boiled some root vegetables in it. Once she'd dissolved some miso in the pot, the miso soup was done. The aroma of the stock filled her nose as she tried a little for taste. It was delicious.

The rice had cooked up fluffy and glossy, and an indescribably tempting aroma rose from the miso-simmered mackerel. Shiori tried a little of that too, and the thick miso sauce had the sort of flavor she just couldn't get enough of.

"That smells really good."

Discerning that the food was ready, Alec stood. Since he ate at Shiori's house from time to time, he helped to set the table, and carried out the plates piled high with food. He also brought out the sweet pickled vegetables she'd preserved in jars which would serve instead of the traditional Japanese-style seasonal pickled vegetables. When Shiori placed Rurii's portion at her feet, the slime excitedly came closer and stared at the food.

"It looks delicious again today."

"Today's fare is root vegetable miso soup and miso-simmered mackerel. And please help yourself to the sweet pickled vegetables."

"Miso soup and miso-simmered mackerel... I've never heard of these dishes before."

"They're foods from my country. I hope you find them to your liking."

Foods from my country... The moment Shiori had said those words, Alec's expression had changed to something that expressed a faint ache. He might

only have been worried for Shiori—a person living in a foreign land—but even so... After a brief span, he pulled himself together and smiled at her.

“Shall we eat?”

“Please do. Help yourself.”

As Shiori watched Alec take his cutlery in hand, she had some of her miso soup. The wonderful aroma of the stock, the gentle flavor of the miso, and the subtle sweetness of the root vegetables filled her mouth. Yes, this was the taste of Japan.

Just as the nostalgic flavor made Shiori’s eyes gently narrow in a smile, she heard a choking sound and a slight groan. When she looked up, she saw Alec holding his cup of miso soup in one hand and covering his mouth with the other. He swallowed and silence descended.

“Is...? Could it be that it doesn’t suit your tastes...?”

Shiori had completely forgotten that some foreigners didn’t like the taste of miso or soy sauce on their own. That’s why she always used soy sauce in combination with ingredients like sugar, alcohol, or butter. But this time...

“I’m sorry. I think I’ll be able to eat the vegetables, but the flavor is just... You seem to be all right with it, though.”

“This is normal in my country, so... Oh!” Suddenly remembering she had butter in a jar in her cold storage, Shiori went to retrieve it.

“Pardon me just a moment.” Shiori scooped out some butter with a spoon and plopped it into Alec’s cup. As it slowly melted, she waited for the perfect moment, then gave the soup a light stir. The aroma of miso and milk wafted upwards.

“If you still can’t eat it after this, please feel free to just leave it.”

Alec gave her a dubious look before bringing the cup close to his nose to check the smell. His look changed to one of surprise and he nervously brought the cup to his mouth.

“Hmm... Yes, I can drink this. It’s really good.”

“I’m so glad.”

Shiori had heard from someone at some point that there were Japanese restaurants overseas that melted butter into their miso soup to better suit the taste of the locals. The method appeared to be effective even here in another world. And Alec seemed to like it. His eyes narrowed into a smile as he sipped his soup.

Well, miso and butter do taste really good together.

After he'd decreased the level of miso soup in his cup to a certain extent, Alec turned his gaze toward the miso-simmered mackerel. He took the fork he'd used earlier, dipped the tip of it into the miso sauce, and brought it to his mouth to check the flavor. Perhaps he was wary after hearing the word "miso."

But she had mixed sugar and alcohol into the sauce as she had reduced it. And it had the sort of sweet-salty flavor that Alec favored.

It would seem he really did like it, because his expression suddenly brightened. Shiori couldn't help laughing.

As Alec chewed the pieces of mackerel that Shiori had cut into a size that would be easy to eat, his expression, which was usually so dignified, broke into a happy grin. Shiori found the sight somehow adorable. Unlike her own serving, Shiori had plated Alec's mackerel together with rice so that he'd be able to eat it without leaving a single drop of sauce behind. As Shiori watched, he mixed the sauce with the rice and ate them together just as she'd thought he would.

"This miso-simmered mackerel... It's really good. And it's easy to eat because there's no fishiness. You'd never think it was blue-backed fish. And I can't get enough of this miso sauce."

"Thank you. I'm so glad you like it."

Shiori took a bite of the miso-simmered mackerel. The fish was plump and so tender it flaked apart in her mouth. The savoriness so characteristic of mackerel intertwined with the miso sauce to create a truly superb flavor. It had turned out even better than she'd thought it would. Shiori praised herself as she ate the steaming fish. The glossy rice was a wonderful accompaniment to the simmered miso dish, and it all put her in a happy mood.

Rurii appeared to have taken a liking to the food too. The slime scooped up

the leftover sauce with the tips of its tentacles and brought it inside itself.

“Could I...ask you to make this for me from time to time?” Alec spoke after he’d gulped down all of his miso-simmered mackerel and sat for a while in thought.

“What?”

“This miso-simmered dish and miso soup.”

The fact that he’d taken such a liking to the foods of her homeland made Shiori happy, but...

“Yes, of course. But it’s difficult to procure miso in any great quantity, so... If it’s all right with you, I could make this when blue-backed fish is available.”

“Is it very precious? Then I feel bad for asking. Sorry. Please forget I said anything.”

Alec’s expression was apologetic and a little bit troubled. Seeing that made Shiori feel sorry toward him too. Oh, but...

“Um...”

“Yes?”

“It’s true that it’s precious, but...” She hesitated. “But when I do make this dish, will you come eat it with me?”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all.” Shiori smiled. “Since miso is so dear, I only ever use it when I really crave foods that use it, or on special occasions. You were kind enough to say that these dishes were delicious, so...”

She wanted to share the special flavor of her homeland with him.

When she told him that, Alec’s eyes widened. She thought his face reddened a bit, but it was probably just her imagination. For some reason, she began to feel embarrassed.

“Special...huh?”

“Yes. Special.”

Alec broke into a smile. “That doesn’t sound bad at all. I would very much like to ask this favor of you.”

“Yes, please do come and eat it with me.”

“I will, thank you.”

They looked at each other and laughed.

This kind of thing is really nice.

A dinner table full of home-cooked food enjoyed while chatting lightheartedly with someone special.

A warm...home.

Shiori had left hers behind, far away, in a distant world. If she reached out her hand, would she be able to have it again? Was she permitted to wish for that? Was she allowed to reach for it?

Shiori looked down, holding back the moisture that threatened to blur her vision. When she looked up again, a rough, clumsy hand reached toward her and touched the corner of her eye. Then the fingers which had gently wiped her eyes pulled away.

Her gaze entangled with one coming from dark magenta eyes. Those eyes, narrowed gently in a little smile, were terribly kind, and so very sweet.

If only I could stay with someone like this forever...

With no idea that the person across from her was wishing for exactly the same thing, Shiori smiled softly. And when Alec saw that, he smiled too.

The two of them finished their food and devoted themselves wholeheartedly to tidying up, all the while savoring the warm kindness that filled the room.

Afterword

Pleased to meet you. My name is Fuguruma You.

Thank you so much for picking up this work, and for reading it.

In the current world(?) of light novels, stories about being transplanted into another world are popular. I thought about trying to write one, and the story which took shape was this: *Housekeeping Mage from Another World*.

However, I wrote this with the premise that I would not create any super strong, cheat-level characters if I could help it, and that included the heroine and hero; I would write with an older audience in mind; and the worldview would be on the severe side. So if you read this expecting the kind of isekai story with cheat-type characters that is so in fashion at the moment, you may feel unsatisfied.

After traveling to another world, the heroine, Shiori, has not been bestowed with special powers. She has no way of proving her identity, and no wealth. No one can understand her language, and the magical power she possesses, so low as to be nearly nonexistent, provides her almost no opportunity for growth. Left with absolutely nothing, Shiori is a woman who survives by hard work alone.

Before she was moved to another world, Shiori was simply an incredibly average office worker, not a technician or specialist, so she has no special knowledge cheats available to her either. She possesses a certain amount of miscellaneous knowledge, and the same skills and abilities as an average housewife. The food that appears within this work isn't the kind of proper cuisine that a professional might create—it's all stuff like quick dishes and budget meals, the sort of home cooking that utilizes whatever is on hand.

Alec—our hero supporting Shiori—and the others that surround our heroine are basically ordinary people. Some are secretly of noble birth or wield authority and influence, but none of them are perfect and they make a lot of mistakes. As a result, Shiori is exposed to danger and gets battered and bruised and depressed. (lol)

Though this work is full of those sorts of frustrating elements, a surprising number of readers have read and enjoyed it, and for that I am truly grateful. Thanks to you, my work has been turned into a book like this. And I am nothing but overjoyed.

To the editorial department and my supervising editor who gave me so much good guidance and advice when this was first being turned into a book and I didn't know my right from my left... To Nama-sensei, who drew the covers and whose splendid illustrations and character designs met every ideal I had and knocked me out of my chair when I first saw them... To all the readers who have supported me... To everyone involved in the publication of this work and their tireless efforts... And to my husband, who was so understanding and supportive of my writing... No matter how much I thank you, it will never be enough. Truly, thank you so very much.

I hope we may meet again.

Bonus Short Story

“Huh? I wonder what’s going on...”

Linus had started to feel hungry, so he’d dropped by the Guild’s dining hall to fill his empty stomach, and had been puzzled by what he saw inside when he got there. For some reason, there were a lot more people than usual. There were often large crowds there at mealtimes, but even so, the lines at the counter seemed awfully long.

Zack appeared from somewhere behind Linus and said, “Yeah, Shiori’s cooking today. Both of the kitchen staff are out with a cold.”

Apparently, Shiori had temporarily stepped into the kitchen.

“What? Shiori?! No wonder everyone’s here!”

Only people who bought Shiori’s portable foods or joined a party with her could eat her cooking. If anyone could have it here today, then that explained the crowds.

“Oh, she’s doing special set meals. Today there’s...a chicken karaage set and a pork shogayaki set...”

“Chicken karaage?!”

Linus jumped for joy. Ever since he’d first eaten Shiori’s karaage during an expedition they’d been on together, it had become one of his absolute favorite foods. He immediately joined the line for the karaage set. Even though there were many people in front of him, it didn’t seem like there would be much of a wait, which might have been down to the serving staff’s skills. One by one, people peeled away, and then it was Linus’s turn. He was given a tray loaded with freshly fried chicken karaage, root vegetable soup, and multigrain bread. In a very good mood, Linus lifted his eyes, but the instant he saw the face of the person who had served him, he involuntarily jerked back.

“Master Alec?! What’re you doing?!”

“You should be able to see that for yourself.”

It seemed Alec was one of the serving staff today. He'd taken off his usual equipment, and in its place he wore an apron that was the wrong size for him and a triangular kerchief, both of which were so white they were oddly painful to look at. On top of that, the way Alec moved as he continued to plate food and place it on trays seemed practiced, like he was used to the work. It was a little scary.

“Some of the serving staff are laid up with a cold too. When I asked if I could help, I ended up having to wear this.”

“It looks good on you.” Zack picked up trays of pork shogayaki as he teased Alec.

Alec replied in a low-throated growl. “Leave me alone.”

“You heard Shiori was gonna be working and just blithely followed her without thinking it through, right?” asked Linus.

After a pause, Alec said, “You talk too much.”

Linus felt he'd hit the mark with his comment. Alec had been told the apron and kerchief were essential equipment in the kitchen and forced to wear them. After looking at Alec with a subtly dubious expression, Linus shifted his gaze to Shiori. He could see the back of her as she bustled around busily in the kitchen. Linus knew that recently Alec seemed to be infatuated with Shiori, but he'd had no idea that Alec was so in love that he'd just quietly accept having to appear in an apron like this. It was surprising because Alec had never shown much interest in women.

It really is true that love changes a person...

Even as these thoughts drifted through Linus's mind, his eyes grew distant and a slight shiver ran down his spine at the sight of Shiori turning to call to Alec, and Alec's sweetly enchanted smile in reply.



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Housekeeping Mage from Another World: Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home! Volume 1

by You Fuguruma

Translated by Elanor Sakamoto Edited by Momo

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